HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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22 October 2018
House of Commons

Monday 22 October 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—
Veterans’ Access to Support Services

1. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve veterans’ access to support services. [907158]

13. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve veterans’ access to support services. [907171]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I recently made a series of announcements on new schemes and initiatives designed to support serving personnel and their families throughout their military careers and beyond. Those include a further package to support armed forces personnel as they enter civilian life, a veterans ID card and a new fund dedicated to supporting the careers of the spouses and civil partners of those who serve.

Nigel Huddleston: I am sure we all agree that more could be done to help veterans when they return to civvy street. Steps have already been taken to improve co-ordination and co-operation between Government Departments on the provision of services for veterans, but what more can be done to improve co-ordination between Departments and local authorities?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. The armed forces covenant, which I know his local authorities are members of, plays a vital role in ensuring that armed forces service personnel and those who have served are able to plug into health services, help with finding a home or any other support that it is so vital for local authorities to provide.

Victoria Prentis: Would the Secretary of State consider visiting the Heyford and Bicester veterans’ group, which meets once a month on Fridays in my constituency and provides a one-stop-shop for veterans and their families, where they can access all the services that they need?

Gavin Williamson: I was hoping that I would get such an invite in the near future, and one has just come along. I would be delighted to visit the group. I know that my hon. Friend does so much work there and is so supportive of them, and I look forward to seeing that at first hand.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Many veterans who have come to my constituency surgeries are being subjected to unnecessary face-to-face medical assessments in order to access social security benefits. Will the Secretary of State speak to his ministerial colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions, to stop that happening?

Gavin Williamson: I would be delighted to do that.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As we approach Remembrance Week, we pay tribute to all those veterans who have served Queen and country, as well as those personnel still serving.

Many of the support services that veterans rely on are delivered by local authorities, but councils across the country have faced deep cuts in recent years, with the Local Government Association estimating that in...
England alone they will face a funding gap of £7.8 billion by 2025. There is a similar picture in devolved nations, due to cuts to the block grant. Bearing in mind the vital role that local authorities play in supporting our veterans, will the Secretary of State join me in urging the Chancellor to rule out any further cuts to local authorities in his Budget next week?

Gavin Williamson: It is very important that all parts of government, whether local or national, play a role in delivering the very best services for our armed forces. The introduction of a veterans ID card will hopefully go a long way towards helping former service personnel to access the vital services provided by local authorities. That will be an important step forward.

19. [907178]Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome what the Secretary of State says about supporting veterans. My constituent, Lieutenant Colonel L.T., served with distinction for almost 30 years. Ever so typically for a man of his standing, he is more concerned about the investigations into the men he served with in Northern Ireland than where investigations may lead for himself. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those veterans also deserve our support?

Gavin Williamson: It is clear that both local and national Government, including the Ministry of Defence, owe those who are serving in the armed forces and those who have served a great deal of support, and we will continue to give them every bit of support that we can.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Thankfully the vast majority of personnel and veterans have very good mental health, but we know that there are challenges, particularly for early service leavers. What more can the MOD do to ensure that service members are directed to support services when they leave the forces?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The actual mental health outcomes of service personnel are exceptionally good, but there are service personnel and former service personnel who do need a bit of extra support. The investment of £2 million in the veterans gateway is aimed at helping and supporting veterans and service leavers to access the type of support that they best need once they have left the armed forces.

UK’s Defence Capability

2. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What assessment has he made of the potential merits of using new and developing technologies to support the UK’s defence capability.

Gavin Williamson: Such technologies do represent a fantastic future for British manufacturing. If we look at the success that the Type 26 has had not just with the eight Type 26 frigates that are going to be built in Britain, but in securing orders in Australia and Canada, we can see that it demonstrates this kind of technology is not only designed in Britain, but should always be built in Britain.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am glad that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has now timed her bobbing correctly. I call Emma Hardy.

Emma Hardy: Workers at BAE Systems in Brough have always been at the forefront of developing technology and manufacturing, but after meeting some of the workers last week I am becoming increasingly concerned about their sole reliance on the Hawk orders. Can the Secretary of State do anything to encourage BAE Systems to diversify their manufacturing and to protect jobs at the Brough site?

Gavin Williamson: The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), and I have been working very closely with BAE Systems, but also with the Qatars in securing a key order for Hawk trainer jets. The hon. Lady raises an important point about the diversity of the site. It is certainly something that I can raise with those at BAE Systems at my next meeting with them, and I will be seeing them later this month.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am delighted that the Secretary of State has seen fit to protect our amphibious capability—HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion—and their related technologies, both new and conventional. These are such crucial tools for the Marines. On that note, will the Secretary of State fully understand and comprehend the importance of 40 Commando to my town of Taunton in his assessment of future capabilities?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for all she did in raising her concerns about Albion and Bulwark. On 40 Commando in Taunton, I absolutely reassure her that there are no plans to move 40 Commando from Taunton: it will be there for a long time into the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State surely knows that, in a world of cyber-warfare, we of course need to invest in new technology and great innovation. However, he should not forget the Cinderellas, such as David Brown Gear Systems in Huddersfield, which is making gear boxes for tanks and for our great vessels. Will he come to Huddersfield and see what we do there?

Gavin Williamson: I know David Brown very well. He is of course the man who saved Aston Martin, so there is a very famous industrial heritage there. If I am not
able to visit David Brown, I am sure the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey, will be able to do so. We will look to make sure that one of us does. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the amount of technology and ingenuity we have in this country, and we should be very proud of it. That is not always just through the prime contractors, but through the many businesses that are so dependent on defence contracts.

**Mr Speaker:** I urge the Secretary of State to follow my very good example: I visited the Huddersfield constituency, and the hon. Gentleman who represents it will be able to do so. We will look to make sure of State’s learning and cultural experience to go there.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The UK’s defence capability has been immeasurably enhanced by the arrival of HMS Queen Elizabeth. We saw her in New York this weekend. Will the Secretary of State consider putting together a national carrier strategy, so that for the next 50 years she has a real, important global purpose?

**Gavin Williamson:** We do need to have a very clear national carrier strategy, because this is not just an important part of projecting power, but a key part of our national deterrence and of making sure that nations all around the globe understand that Britain has the capability to defend herself and to protect our international interests.

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State commend Cammell Laird for winning for the second time its support order for the Royal Navy? Given the level of technology in the yard, is it not well placed for the new frigate orders? Although we are careful about taxpayers’ money and will not give him the hospitality that Huddersfield has offered, will he please come?

**Gavin Williamson:** I am getting a lot of invites and feel privileged to have so many. I congratulate Cammell Laird very much on its successful bid. It goes to show how vital money spent by the MOD is to many local economies. I shall endeavour to visit Cammell in the near future, but if I do not, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey, will certainly do so.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Government believe it is vital to future-proof technologies, so I was shocked to learn that the Ministry of Defence has given the green light—yet again—to an American company, Boeing, for the replacement of the Sentry AWACS aircraft. That has been done without any competitive process, and it has been said that Boeing is planning to use old aircraft and semi-obsolete radar. Clearly there are differences of opinion about what Boeing has to offer, so will the Secretary of State agree to an independent evaluation of all the options to be considered?

**Gavin Williamson:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman did not intentionally mislead the House by implying that we are going to have old aircraft. We will have new aircraft in terms of the potential procurement of Wedgetail. We are confident that this is the best capability; it is world leading and it has the best ability to bring it to our Royal Air Force at the earliest possible stage.

**Armed Forces Pay**

3. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of armed forces pay.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces** (Mark Lancaster): There is a bidding war, may I say that, as the last six generations of my family came from Huddersfield, I am definitely up for coming back there?

Our assessments are made with the support of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. In making recommendations, the AFPRB takes account of the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitable service personnel, affordability, the inflation target and the need for armed forces’ pay to be broadly comparable with that of civilians.

**Mike Amesbury:** Does the Minister share my concern that all three services are running below strength, and the Government’s delay in lifting the public sector pay cap has exacerbated the problem?

**Mark Lancaster:** I am delighted to say, and I am sure the House will wish to know, that the 2% pay award has now been paid retrospectively, and the 0.9% bonus element will be paid in two lump sums, one next month and one in March.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): The frontline of our country’s defence is increasingly in cyber-space, and the strength of that defence depends on the calibre of the people operating in it, such as my constituents at GCHQ. What steps are being taken to ensure that payscales are sufficient to attract and retain the brightest and the best?

**Mark Lancaster:** We take those factors into consideration, and I was delighted to open the new defence cyber-school back in March. We feel strongly that cyber-skills should become part of the core skills of all our armed forces.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): How many staff under the age of 25 are paid less than £8.75 an hour?

**Mark Lancaster:** It will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I do not have that figure at my fingertips, but I will write to him.

**Armed Forces Personnel Numbers**

4. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel.

**Mark Lancaster:** Our assessments are made with the support of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. In making recommendations, the AFPRB takes account of the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitable service personnel, affordability, the inflation target and the need for armed forces’ pay to be broadly comparable with that of civilians.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces** (Mark Lancaster): We remain committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces. We have a range of measures under way to improve recruitment and retention, and these are...
kept under constant review. Importantly, the services continue to meet all their current commitments, keeping the country and its interests safe.

**Jeff Smith:** The Armed Forces Pay Review Body reports that the outflow rates—personnel leaving the armed forces—are at “historically high levels” under this Government. Why does the Minister think that is?

**Mark Lancaster:** Retaining our service personnel is always a challenge, and that is precisely why we are focusing hard on the offer—the opportunity to train and to serve overseas. Only this month, some 5,500 personnel are serving on Saif Sareea 3 in Oman; equally, we have servicemen serving in Estonia and on Exercise Trident Juncture in Norway. We have perhaps not previously had those opportunities to train and to serve overseas, which are key to retention.

**Alex Norris:** The latest armed forces continuous attitude survey shows that 67% of personnel perceive the morale of their service as low. That clearly impacts on the retention of those who serve. Did it concern Ministers to read that, and when can we expect it to get better?

**Mark Lancaster:** I am confident that it will get better, partly for the reasons I have just outlined. We are focusing very hard on the offer to our service personnel to ensure that people stay. That is not only about pay—we have talked about the pay award—but the opportunities we give to our service personnel and the training they receive. There are very few professions in this country where one can join with limited qualifications and then leave with a degree-level apprenticeship. That is the sort of offer we make in the armed forces, and we are determined to continue.

**Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con):** Capita’s Army recruitment contract has been an unmitigated disaster, so as a member of the Select Committee I was very relieved to hear the Secretary of State say in evidence to us last week that if necessary he would be prepared to sack it. The sooner the better. May I ask the Minister of State, who we all respect, whether there is evidence to us last week that if necessary he would be prepared to sack it. The sooner the better. May I ask the Minister of State, who we all respect, whether there is any good news at all on Army recruitment that he can share with the House today?

**Mark Lancaster:** As my right hon. Friend says, the Secretary of State was very clear, in the evidence he gave to the Select Committee, that there is always the option of ending the contract. I am pleased to say that there is good news. This is a long process, from application stage to delivering a soldier who is trained perhaps a year later, but we are now seeing applications at a five-year high, so the hopper is being filled at a rate not seen for the past five years. Equally, the conversion rate—managing to get applications converted and on to training—is also improving. At the start of the pipeline there are very positive signs indeed.

**Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con):** It is a regrettable fact that the legal pursuit of our veterans is a significant deterrent to recruitment. What concrete steps is the Department taking to bring it to an end?

**Mark Lancaster:** I have not seen any evidence that supports what my hon. Friend has just said, so I would be grateful if he could supply it. None the less, the point he makes about our veterans being pursued legally is an important one. I can only refer him back to the Adjournment debate, I think on 25 June, when over 50 right hon. and hon. Members came to the House to discuss the matter. There is a consensus across the House that this is an issue we simply must address. He will be aware that the Government have consulted on the issue and we intend to publish the results of the consultation shortly.

**Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** A scathing report by the Public Accounts Committee has found that the Ministry of Defence lacks the strategy to remedy, before 2023, the skills shortages now apparent in over 100 critical trades. Those shortages are putting an unprecedented strain on servicemen and servicewomen, with morale in freefall. When will the Government face up to the fact that personnel numbers have been plummeting on their watch, and what specific action will the Minister take to respond to the recommendations in the Committee’s report?

**Mark Lancaster:** We have already discussed some of the actions we are taking, but equally it is important to say that, while the hon. Lady likes to project a picture of gloom, the Army, for example, is actually over 93% manned and fulfils all its operational commitments. Our service personnel are getting opportunities today—the opportunity to train overseas, or, crucially, through training itself—that they may not have had five or six years ago. I have already talked about the fact that the Ministry of Defence is the largest provider of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom. These are some of the things that the hon. Lady might like to champion and praise for a change.

21. [907180] **Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** In terms of making a career in our armed forces a positive choice, many young people get their first taste of what life might be like in the armed forces by joining the cadets. The Scottish Government make it as difficult as possible for the cadets to recruit in Scottish schools. What will the Minister do to make it easier for young Scots to have the opportunity to join the cadets and gain the advantage of that experience?

**Mark Lancaster:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced that in England and Wales, we will be increasing the number of schools with cadets, and I like to think that this is a good example. We do not recruit directly from the cadets—let us be absolutely clear. None the less, it is a fact that a large percentage of members of the armed forces were once cadets, and not only that—although the vast majority will not go on to joined the armed forces, the sorts of values that they are taught as cadets will set them up well for life.

**CBRN Defence Capability**

5. **Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase investment in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence capability.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew):** The UK has world-leading counter-chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capabilities. The MOD has committed around £950 million to maintain and improve these over the next 10 years.
Stephen Hammond: The Minister will know that following Salisbury, the armed forces played a vital role in identifying the nerve agent and helping to clear up the scene. Will he reassure the House that the MOD will do everything that it can to ensure that the investment in that capability will be maintained and increased?

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely, and I pay tribute to all those who worked so carefully and so hard in Salisbury and Amesbury on our behalf. As I said, the £950 million is there to improve this over the next 10 years. That includes £48 million to help to set up a new chemical weapons defence centre in Porton Down to make sure that we maintain our cutting-edge capability in chemical analysis and defence.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Earlier this month, along with other Members of the NATO Parliament, I visited the Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence Centre of Excellence in the Czech Republic. One of the training courses that it runs is a skills training course for first responders—for police and ambulance personnel—who may often, as in Salisbury, be the first on the scene. What efforts is the Minister of Defence making to make sure that we have that capability in this country?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. Of course, this is not just about the armed forces; we have to recognise that all the emergency services were there very quickly. We need to ensure that they have all the training that they need. I will speak to colleagues in other Departments to ensure that that is happening.

Capita Management of Army Recruitment

6. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Whether his Department has plans to cancel its contracts with Capita for the management of Army recruitment. [907163]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Army is working closely with Capita to deliver improvements to recruitment. While there are positive indicators that measures are having an impact, I continue to monitor the Recruiting Partnering Project very closely and hold regular discussions with my officials regarding the contract.

Ronnie Cowan: Subject to a legal challenge, Capita was awarded the MOD fire and rescue contract despite an MOD financial assessment that gave the company the highest category of distress and vulnerability. With shoddy finances and an abysmal record of delivery, does the Minister agree with the MOD fire and rescue contract was awarded the MOD fire and rescue contract despite a risk aversion in the management of it, not least on the medical side from the people making health assessments?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He will be aware of recent work being carried out by the Ministry of Defence through a medical symposium to try to tackle these very issues. Sometimes, some of the medical reasons for not joining are frankly quite archaic. To give a brief example, if someone has had childhood asthma, they cannot join even if they no longer have it, even though the chances are that it will not return until that person is probably in their 50s, when, of course, 99% of service personnel will have left.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Minister is celebrating current recruitment levels. Will he explain why the Scots Guards is currently under-recruited by 36%?

Mark Lancaster: I am not celebrating current recruitment levels. What I am saying is that we are all aware of the challenges facing the defence recruiting system some months ago, but given that this is a long pipeline, I am confident that the hopper at the start of that process, which can take up to a year, is now at a five-year high. I hope and I am confident that we will then see that slowly come through the system, which will result in an increase in the number of our service personnel.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The sorry saga of the Capita recruitment programme is made worse by the fact that the Ministry of Defence was told at the time that it would not work. I hope the programme will be sorted out in the short term, but until then will the Minister place a greater emphasis on retaining those superb personnel currently engaged in our armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: There are always two factors in the equation of armed forces numbers. One, clearly, is the number we recruit, and being a bottom-fed organisation, we have to keep recruiting, but equally, although we cannot retain everybody—the rank structure does not allow it—it is important that we continue to retain as many service personnel as possible for as long as possible. I have already highlighted some of the things we are doing to make that happen.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I send the best wishes of the Scottish National party to the UK team at the Invictus games? I cannot believe it has been left to the SNP to do that—but there we go!

Can the Minister tell me the total financial value of Capita’s contracts with his Department?

Mark Lancaster: Once again, it may come as a surprise, but off the top of my head, no I cannot, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman.
The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): According to a written answer from the Minister, the figure is £1.15 billion. This addiction to privatisation at the MOD, which I get is ideologically attached to, is causing mayhem, from recruitment to the fire and rescue service. If he pledges to sack Capita, he will have the support of people behind him, of the people across from him and of the SNP Benches. Why won’t he do it?

Mark Lancaster: The Secretary of State has made it clear that that always remains an option, but if the hon. Gentleman had listened to a word I had said over the past 10 minutes, rather than preparing his question, he might have realised that there was hope. I am confident, at the start of this process, that things are getting better.

South China Sea

8. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What assessment he has made of the security situation in the South China sea.

Kevin Foster: The continuing expansion of Chinese military activity in the South China sea, particularly around the Paracel islands, should worry anyone concerned about stability in the region, hence it was welcome to see HMS Albion there, flying the white flag—[Laughter.]—I mean the white ensign, but more will be necessary to reassure our allies. What are my right hon. Friend’s thoughts on more forward deployment of Royal Navy assets in this region—flying the correct flag?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about how our allies have seen our presence in the Indo-Pacific region. We have had the largest deployment of the surface fleet in a generation, and that will continue with HMS Argyll, which is due to be on exercise with HMS Montrose, which will be going to the region next year. It all goes to show that our passion and commitment to upholding the rules-based international system.

Kevin Foster: The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I pay tribute to the crews of HMS Albion and HMS Sutherland, which have played an important role in upholding freedom of navigation in the South China sea. Security in that region is vital to the UK and its global economic interests, and we shall not shy away from asserting our commitment to upholding the rules-based international system.

Kevin Foster: The continuing expansion of Chinese military activity in the South China sea, particularly around the Paracel islands, should worry anyone concerned about stability in the region, hence it was welcome to see HMS Albion there, flying the white flag—[Laughter.]—I mean the white ensign, but more will be necessary to reassure our allies. What are my right hon. Friend’s thoughts on more forward deployment of Royal Navy assets in this region—flying the correct flag?

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possible. We recognise the important role that must be played in respect of reconstruction following such a devastating conflict.

Defence Expenditure Commitment

10. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect on NATO capabilities of the NATO commitment to allocate 20% of defence expenditure to major equipment. [907167]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): The 20% target for major equipment ensures that investment is directed towards NATO’s capability priorities, which directly enhances the security of the alliance. The United Kingdom continues to spend more than 2% of GDP on defence, and to spend more than 20% of that on major equipment. That investment helps to keep the UK safe, and ensures that NATO remains at the heart of our defence.

Peter Heaton-Jones: The NATO commitment opens up many potential opportunities for UK shipbuilders. Sadly, however, it comes at a time when Babcock International is considering the future of Appledore shipyard, which is very concerning. Will the Minister join me, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), in continuing to work with Babcock in committing ourselves to a long-term future for Appledore?

Stuart Andrew: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon, for the work that they are doing on an issue that I know is important to them. One of the key aims of the national shipbuilding strategy is that UK shipbuilders should be competitive in overseas markets as well as domestically, so that we can secure their long-term future. I hope that they will engage in all the competitions that exist.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Mr Gorbachev has said that the United States’ decision to withdraw from the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty is a mistake. He has said: “Under no circumstances should we tear up old disarmament agreements...Do they really not understand in Washington what this could lead to?”

I am not naive about Russia and the threat from Russia, but what is the future of existing international nuclear non-proliferation treaties, and what additional effect will that have on NATO’s budget?

Stuart Andrew: I apologise for missing the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but we want to ensure that we are a full member of NATO.

Phil Wilson: What are the implications for its budget?

Stuart Andrew: We have made a commitment to spend 2% of GDP, and we have never spent less than 2%. We are doing everything we can to work with other partners and encourage them to do exactly the same.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): NATO has always been the cornerstone of Britain’s defence, so does my hon. Friend agree that the worst thing that could possibly happen to NATO would be the arrival of a Government whose leader has said recently of NATO: “I’d rather we weren’t in it”.

He has said: “NATO, the father of the Cold War in the 1940s, should have shut up shop in 1990”.

That was from none other than the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. NATO is an important alliance that we are proud to be a member of, and it is part of our defence strategy. It is extremely alarming to hear some of the views from the Leader of the Opposition.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty was mentioned earlier. Is not one of the consequences of the actions of President Trump that short and medium-range nuclear missiles will have to be relocated on UK soil?

Stuart Andrew: One of the things that we have to make clear is that we want Russia to adhere to the treaty in the first place—that is incredibly important. The treaty was incredibly important at the time it was signed. We need to ensure that they maintain the treaty and stick to the values it presents to us.

UK Cyber Counter-measures: Russian Activity

11. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK’s cyber-counter-measures as a result of alleged Russian malicious activity in Europe. [907168]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Ministry of Defence takes cyber-security extremely seriously and co-ordinates closely with the National Cyber Security Centre. I cannot comment on specific measures that the Department has taken, for national security reasons, but I can say that the Government have identified a number of cyber-actors widely known to have been conducting cyber-attacks around the world, and who are in fact from the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service. The cyber-attacks are a further demonstration of Russia’s disregard for international institutions and norms.

Christine Jardine: As the Secretary of State says, it appears that Russia has developed sophisticated cyber-espionage and cyber-warfare capabilities that it is utilising to pursue its strategic goals. Can he assure us that the Government will provide the dedicated leadership needed to co-ordinate the multi-agency response to this threat?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady raises an important point about how we have to work right across Government, and also right across industry. That is why we have been committed to investing £1.9 billion in this area. It is about co-ordinating that, bringing people together and ensuring that vulnerabilities do not open up in the industrial sector, so we are working closely with the sector.

Syria

12. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the security situation in Syria on the delivery of aid to that country by the armed forces. [907170]
The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The UK supports the United Nations, non-governmental organisations and the Red Cross to meet the needs of vulnerable people in Syria and refugees in the region. So far we have committed £2.71 billion since 2012.

Alison McGovern: The situation in Syria is complex and unpredictable, and many civilians are at risk. Given what the Secretary of State has just said about the financial commitment that this country has made to vulnerable civilians, I ask him to keep all options on the table and to keep talking to his colleagues in the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office to ensure that we do everything we can to get basic supplies to the civilians who need them in Syria.

Gavin Williamson: Every time there is such a request, we consider it very closely, to see how best we can offer help and support. We recognise the dreadful plight that so many people are suffering in Syria. The Ministry of Defence and our armed forces will always be there to support important humanitarian work.

NATO

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What assessment he has made of the importance of NATO to UK national security.

Gavin Williamson: The situation in Syria is complex

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): Earlier this month I met my counterparts in NATO to discuss efforts to strengthen the alliance, including further burden sharing and working with allies so that they can step up their efforts to tackle today’s threats, including by deterring malicious cyber-attacks.

Luke Hall: Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK should continue to play a leading role in NATO, and that working with our allies to combat terrorism and the increasingly sophisticated threat of cyber-attacks should remain a priority?

Gavin Williamson: We should be incredibly proud of the leading role that we play; we were the first nation to commit our offensive cyber-capabilities to NATO, we have seen an uplift in troop numbers in NATO’s Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, and we are second only to the United States in supporting NATO and the work it does.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Government’s counting within the 2% that we spend on defence things that would never have been counted under previous Governments undermines our voice when it comes to NATO. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to confirm that current spending is simply inadequate if Britain wants to play a global role in the defence of the country?

Gavin Williamson: Britain has met and will always meet its NATO commitments, and we undertake to spend the money that is required by NATO guidelines.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As I am sure you will vividly remember, Mr Speaker, on this very date 35 years ago the largest ever demonstration by the campaign for one-sided nuclear disarmament marched in London. Just under 100,000 people marched—although, typically, four times that number was claimed—and the then leader of the Labour party, a lifelong unilateralist, told the rally that NATO should not deploy cruise or Pershing II missiles. If that policy had been followed, we would not have had an intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. What assessment have my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made of whether that INF treaty, which has been successful for so long, has now been violated by Russia?

Gavin Williamson: It has been our clear and consistent view that Russia has been in breach of that treaty. We urge Russia to comply with the treaty.

Mr Speaker: I do vividly remember the demonstration in question, not least because, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) is keenly aware, at almost exactly the same time I made an absolutely splendid speech at the University of Essex student union that was based overwhelmingly on the sagacious briefing provided by the right hon. Gentleman.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for listening to Plymouth’s campaigns to base the new Type 26 frigates in Devonport, in the constituency that I represent, and to save Albion and Bulwark from being cut. Can he give any further reassurance to the workers in Devonport that we will be a base for future NATO operations by confirming that we will be the home to the Royal Marines super-base as well?

Gavin Williamson: I should like to pay tribute to all the Members of Parliament in Devon and Cornwall who have campaigned so hard on the basing of the Type 26s and on keeping Albion and Bulwark. We are not going to make any early comments on the future basing arrangements, but I take note of the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

Uganda

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): What military support the UK provides to Uganda.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The majority of UK military support to Uganda involves training for the African Union mission to Somalia, which includes training officer cadets at Sandhurst and senior officers at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.

Dr Williams: Ugandan soldiers recently tortured five Members of Parliament, including the pop star Bobi Wine, and dozens of others. Two of those MPs might never walk again. Why is the UK training those Ugandan forces at Sandhurst?

Mark Lancaster: We are not training those Ugandan forces. Let me be absolutely clear about this Government’s condemnation of the actions involving those Members of Parliament. The Ministry of Defence does not engage with the special forces command, which operates separately from the mainstream Ugandan people’s defence force. It was the special forces command that was involved in that incident.
Prosecution of Veterans: Northern Ireland

16. **Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that veterans are given adequate protection from prosecution in relation to their service in Northern Ireland.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Our service personnel perform exceptional feats in difficult circumstances to protect this country. The Government’s view is that the institutions set out in the draft Stormont House agreement Bill, on which public consultation has just concluded, are the best way to ensure a fair, balanced and proportionate approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland.

**Greg Hands:** Will my right hon. Friend comment on the case mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) in the Select Committee last week? If I understood this correctly, the case related to a 77-year-old veteran who is suffering from terminal cancer and whose case has already been investigated. The soldier was cleared in 1975, and I understand that everyone else involved in the incident is now dead. Can my right hon. Friend tell us why this has happened?

**Mark Lancaster:** I believe that my right hon. Friend is referring to the case of Dennis Hutchings, which has been discussed on several occasions in this Chamber. Indeed, Mr Hutchings has very much become the figure who demonstrates why so many colleagues across the House are so uneasy about this process. I would like to reassure my right hon. Friend that the Ministry of Defence continues to support Mr Hutchings in every way we possibly can. This underlines why we are absolutely determined to put this right and sort out this issue.

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): To echo the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), my constituent Mr Tom Lynch received a service medal that he asked me personally to return to the Prime Minister when he received a very distressing letter from the Historical Enquiries Team. Please can we have every assurance that these investigations, although necessary, will be carried out in the most sensitive manner, especially for those veterans who suffer from dementia and who are in their 80s?

**Mark Lancaster:** Frankly, in my 14 years in Parliament, I have found few issues on which the House is unified to such an extent. The consultation has recently closed. Speaking as a serviceman, I can only reassure the House of how keen we are to try to address this issue. I am sure there will be an announcement in the House in due course.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We are about to move on to topical questions, but I advise the right hon. Members for Warley (John Spellar) and for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), that, having missed out on substantives, they can take their chance in topicals. I am trying to encourage them.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907198] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):** I take the opportunity to wish our team who are taking part in the Invictus games the very best. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), is currently in Sydney supporting them, so sadly is unable to be in the Chamber today.

As we approach the centenary of the end of the first world war and this year’s armistice commemorations, we remember all those who have fought and died in the service of this country. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will go to the thousands of events up and down the country to remember those who have lost their lives and pay tribute to our armed forces personnel, both current and former.

**Diana Johnson:** I concur with the Secretary of State’s comments.

I welcome the finalised deal for the nine Hawk aircraft being sold to Qatar. It is important for the employees at BAE Systems at Brough, for skilled local jobs and for the flag for British defence manufacturing, but there is more to do. What further support could the Government offer to win export orders for the Hawk in places such as Kuwait?

**Gavin Williamson:** As was touched on earlier, we have held discussions with the Qatari Government about the order for nine Hawks. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), was out in Kuwait furthering discussions about future orders for the Hawk. We will continue to work closely with BAE Systems to land more orders to sustain Brough.

T5. [907202] **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): A constituent wrote to me about his father, who served on HMS Repulse and survived both its sinking and his imprisonment in Japan. More than 500 of his fellow sailors died aboard the ship, which is their final resting place. Today, many warships have been partially or completely destroyed by scavengers. What steps has my right hon. Friend taken to prevent further destruction of our maritime war graves?

**Gavin Williamson:** The whole House will be united in complete disgust at what has happened. These are war graves. We would not tolerate the desecration of war graves on land, and we should not tolerate the desecration of war graves at sea. We have instructed a survey of the site and are engaged with other Governments to ensure that, where ships are under their flags, action is taken to ensure that such behaviour does not go unpunished.

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): At last month’s Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister said that austerity is over, but we know that the Tories’ record on defence is one of deep cuts and falling budgets. In cash terms, defence spending has been slashed by £4.9 billion since
Labour left office. Can the Secretary of State tell us by how much his party has cut the defence budget in real terms?

**Gavin Williamson:** The defence budget is going up in real terms year on year. We have a commitment for it to go up every year by £1 billion up to 2021.

**Nia Griffith:** With due respect, I have to correct the record. Between 2010 and 2017, the real-terms value of the defence budget fell by nearly £10 billion, which puts immense strain on the ability of the Ministry of Defence to meet its commitments. We welcome the long overdue pay rise for service personnel, but whereas Labour set out a clear plan to fund a fair pay rise, will the Secretary of State confirm that his Government is providing no new money to cover the cost and therefore that he will have to make additional cuts elsewhere to give our forces the pay rise they deserve?

**Gavin Williamson:** We all welcome the increase in service personnel pay. When I meet service personnel, whether in the UK or abroad, they particularly point out that this is the largest pay increase they have experienced since 2010.

T6. [907203] **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is well aware of the strength of feeling in North Devon on securing the future of Royal Marines base Chivenor. When will we receive a decision?

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):** The better defence estate strategy was published about two years ago, and the strategy remains in place as it stands. The strategy extends over some 20 years, and the Royal Navy continues to work to establish the amphibious centre of excellence in Plymouth.

**T2. [907199] Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Defence Secretary has said that for every £1 spent on defence, we get £4 in return. How can the Government square such comments with their willingness to see the fleet solid support ship built in foreign yards?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew):** We are currently in the pre-qualification process, which means we are making sure that we get the very best price for the ships we need. The FSS is not classed as a warship, and therefore it has to go out to international competition. We want to make sure that we have British shipyards competing for the contracts so that they become world competitors when other countries are looking to offer such contracts.

**T7. [907204] Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): Earlier this year, cadets in Arbroath embarked on a new era with the opening of a new £600,000 joint facility in the town. Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), will the Secretary of State underline the Department’s plan for increasing investment in cadet units across the UK?

**Gavin Williamson:** We will be doing everything we can to increase cadet units right across the United Kingdom. Cadet units play a vital role in everything we do by sending out the message that our armed forces are important to every community in the United Kingdom.

T3. [907200] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has four remaining Normandy veterans who fought in the second world war. LIBOR funding will be needed to give them, and their carers, the opportunity to make one last visit to mark D-day on 6 June 2019. How will the Minister ensure that they are able to pay their respects next year and that they will be able to take their carers with them to attend fully?

**Mark Lancaster:** The hon. Lady is right that next year is a significant anniversary of the Normandy invasions, and it is important that we get it right. We are looking carefully at the right way for the Ministry of Defence to support the event, and an announcement will be made in due course.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s work on mental health support for veterans and members of the armed forces. Does he agree that the 24/7 mental health helpline plays a vital role in supporting those personnel and needs maximum publicity?

**Gavin Williamson:** The helpline is an important part of everything we do, but we can never rest in looking at what more we can do to support those who are serving and those who have served.

**T4. [907201] Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): My Jamaican constituent applied for leave to remain after serving with the Royal Marines for seven years. He has post-traumatic stress disorder and found it difficult to cope with the increasing demands for information from the Home Office. What is the MOD doing so that service members are directed to support services when they leave the armed forces?

**Mark Lancaster:** We offer an enormous amount of support through the career transition partnership, and we offer mental health and, indeed, physical support to veterans. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me with the details of that individual case, I am more than happy to look into it.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I refer the House to my entry on the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I warmly welcome the combat air strategy, announced earlier this year. Will Ministers update the House on any potential discussions with future national partners?

**Gavin Williamson:** We continue to work closely with industry, especially BAE Systems. As we develop this strategy, four companies are at the heart of it—BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo and MBDA—but we are in discussions with other nations. I am afraid that I am not in a position to update the House on who they are.

**T8. [907206] Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State inform the House about what has happened to the modernising defence programme?

**Gavin Williamson:** We will continue to keep the House informed and we will update the House with the findings in due course.
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This follows on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about the situation in the South China sea, as last week I had the pleasure to meet representatives of our allies in the region. HMS Albion gave a demonstration of freedom of waters and of navigation, and the importance of that cannot be overstated. Is this going to become a regular exercise, because our allies in the region would be very happy to see that?

Gavin Williamson: We are committed to stepping up our presence right across the Indo-Pacific area. I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot go into operational details at the moment, but we see our Royal Navy playing an important role in upholding our values.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) deserves some encouragement at this very early stage of his parliamentary career!

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Does the Minister not understand that to export defence equipment we have to have a strong home market, and that is why other European countries insist on building vessels such as the fleet solid support ships in their own yards, with their own workers. What blind dogma is stopping these Ministers and their Department doing the same and ensuring that we make them in Britain?

Stuart Andrew: As I said a moment ago, we are making sure that we go out to international competition, because that gives value for money to this country, and we can also then invest the savings we make in other capabilities. It means that we attract the best and affordable solutions. It also brings competition at the heart of our shipbuilding strategy, because we want our shipyards to go out there and compete for international orders.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Captain Mainwaring’s doughty band of men who formed the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard are in danger of looking like special forces, on account of their ability to climb in and out of Lance Corporal Jones’s converted bread van, when compared with the modern Army, which has 18,000 clinically obese soldiers and servicemen, with 398 having type 2 diabetes, 160 being on prescribed diet pills and 16 having had liposuction. When is the Secretary of State going to do something about the state of the fitness of the British armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this matter, but, of course, as I look across this Chamber, I do wonder whether or not this was the right establishment to be criticising the British Army for obesity. Every year, all soldiers are required to carry out fitness tests. He will have realised, or seen, that from 1 April we are changing that annual fitness test to make sure it is more aligned with the combat roles our soldiers are required to carry out.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) rose—

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Gosh, there is something of an internal Scottish National party competition. It is an invidious choice between three celebrated individuals, one of whom is a member of the Select Committee. I call Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, let me say that I agree with the Secretary of State that we should be mindful of the armistice we commemorate this year. I will be joining family at Westminster abbey later this year to commemorate my great uncle James from County Mayo, who fell at Passchendaele.

Asbestos kills, and it is a silent killer. I represent a constituency with the highest rates of mesothelioma not only in Scotland or the United Kingdom, but in Europe. I was therefore dumbfounded at a recent Defence Committee meeting when senior members of the Ministry of Defence seemed to be silent and unable to answer questions on the use of asbestos in Sea King helicopters between 1969 and 2016. I have even heard that two of them have been brought back into service for training purposes. Will the Secretary of State please ensure that the report that has been brought about is fully published and that we ensure that those exposed to asbestos, both civilian and military, get due compensation, if affected?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to bring this issue up. I am starting to look at it in more detail. If he would allow me, I would like to write to him with further details, once I have had more information from the Department.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) offers the Chamber on a regular basis a passable imitation of Demosthenes, but Demosthenes was not subject to constraints of time, whereas under our Question Time procedures the hon. Gentleman and other Members are. I advise him to plough through the pages of the textbook on pithy questions by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne).
EU Customs Union and Draft Withdrawal Agreement: Cost

3.34 pm

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con) **(Urgent Question):** Will the Government make a statement on the additional costs of staying in the EU customs union after 2020 and provide an updated estimate of the total costs of the current draft of the withdrawal agreement?

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** Every arm of Government is working at pace to firm up and put in place all necessary arrangements to ensure that we are ready to leave and chart our own course as global Britain. The Government will continue to update Parliament on the progress of the negotiations, and the Prime Minister will update the House shortly in this regard in a post-Council statement.

In respect of the customs union, common rules will remain in place throughout the implementation period to give businesses and citizens critical certainty. This will mean that businesses can trade on the same terms as now until the end of 2020. As the Prime Minister has said, a further idea has emerged—and it is an idea at this stage—to create an option to extend the implementation period for a matter of months, and it would only be a matter of months. But as the Prime Minister has made clear, this is not expected to be used, because we are working to ensure that we have a future relationship in place by the end of December 2020.

As the House will appreciate, the length and cost of any extension to the implementation period are subject to negotiations. Throughout the implementation period, we will continue to build our new relationship, one which will see the UK leave the single market and the customs union to forge our own path and pursue an independent trade policy while protecting jobs and supporting growth.

During the progression of our exit negotiations, we reached a financial settlement with the EU that did two things—honoured our commitments made during our membership and ensured the fairest possible deal for UK taxpayers. In December, we estimated the size of the settlement to be between £35 billion to £39 billion, using reasonable assumptions and publicly available data. In April, the National Audit Office confirmed that this was reasonable.

The Government are committed to upholding our parliamentary democracy through honouring the result of the referendum and remaining fully transparent with Parliament on the deal that is reached, in advance of the meaningful vote.

**John Redwood:** The Treasury should do some calculations, because it would be an act of great rashness to agree to extend our period when we would be in another seven-year financial period for the EU, with all the consequences that might bring. It could cost £15 billion or more for a year and we would probably have to accept liabilities that might extend for the whole seven-year financing period. Why wouldn’t the EU front-load its expenses when we were still in the thing, and why wouldn’t it expect us to meet the forward commitments, as it says it wants us to do as and when we leave under the existing seven-year period?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman, whose flow is difficult to stop—and I would not want it to be stopped.

The right hon. Gentleman must be heard. Mr Matheson, you are normally a most cerebral individual. Take a tablet.

**John Redwood:** Our economy is being deliberately slowed by a fiscal and monetary squeeze that we need to lift. We need tax cuts to raise people’s take-home pay so that they have more spending power. All this is possible if we do not give £39 billion to the EU, and all this will be even more possible if we do not pledge another £15 billion or £20 billion for some time never, if we are now going to give in yet again. When will the Government stand up to the EU, when will the Government say that they want a free trade agreement and they do not see the need to pay for it, and when will the Government rule out signing a withdrawal agreement that is a surrender document that we cannot afford?

**John Glen:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for a number of Budget representations on that point. What I can confirm is that, when the sum of £35 billion to £39 billion was agreed, it was agreed on three principles: the UK would not make its payments sooner than it would otherwise have done; it would be based on the actual rather than the forecast; and it would mean that we would include all benefits as a member state. I recognise the wide range of concerns in the House, including those raised by my right hon. Friend. But we are at a delicate stage of the negotiations and the Prime Minister will be speaking to the House shortly.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has some brass neck. He spent eight years being a cheerleader for austerity and he comes to the House today and says that; it is unbelievable. Amid the Tory quarrelling, the Prime Minister’s negotiations appear to succumb to a new failure every day. She has stood staring at the menu for two years while the Cabinet devours itself. It now seems that it may take a bit longer for her to make up her mind, demanding that the EU give further time in relation to the transition period. What we cannot fathom is how the Government are unable to negotiate our exit within the agreed period, begging instead to make it longer.

Humiliatingly, I have to say, we hear that 95% of the agreement is done, as though that is supposed to reassure us. Perhaps I may remind the Government that 95% of the Titanic’s journey was completed successfully. Meanwhile, the Government have gone from discussing a backstop to discussing a backstop to a backstop, to requesting an extension to the transition. These do not signal a Government who are about to emerge victoriously.

Let me ask a couple of questions, if this 95% deal is done. First, on the EU’s trade policy, during the transition, the common external tariff and customs regime will continue to apply to the UK, but third countries will...
have no legal obligation to continue to treat the UK as if it were a member state. Therefore, what trilateral discussions have the Government had with both the EU and third country partners, such as Mexico, Switzerland and the South Korea, with which the EU has preferential trading agreements in place, to ensure that the UK will continue to benefit from these arrangements during the transition period? Secondly, what progress have the Government made towards acceding to agreements facilitating trade, such as the pan-Euro Mediterranean convention that facilitates diagonal cumulation of origin, during the transition period and in any deal thereafter?

These matters, along with the question of the wider trade in goods, are easily resolvable with the transition period that has already been agreed. If the Government had got their act together, there would not be talk of additional time. The only thing that is costing the Government is this useless Government.

John Glen: It is difficult to discern the precise questions there, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The Government are in a negotiation and there are a number of issues that are not yet resolved. With respect to the final state around our future freedom to trade, those are matters that will be reported on to this House before there is a meaningful vote. So he needs to be patient a little longer as we move through that last 5% and deal with those matters.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind the House that there is a further urgent question afterwards and then a statement by the Prime Minister, so I shall have to take a view as to the point at which we need to move on, but I would be assisted if colleagues were extremely brief.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I am very concerned about the Government’s plans because, essentially, they mean our staying in a customs union in which we will have no say on the rules for a prolonged period, at the very moment that the global economy is facing some significant risks. Can my hon. Friend explain how this is in the UK’s national interest?

John Glen: I have set forward the Government’s position with respect to the negotiation and the idea about a modest extension in terms of months. It will be for the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to update the House sooner, but I acknowledge my right hon. Friend’s point with respect to the opportunities that exist beyond the EU in terms of finding a settlement that gives us the freedom to develop our trading relationships.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was going to start my question by thanking the Chancellor for coming and answering questions on the cost of Brexit, but it is not the Chancellor who is here and I am afraid that the Economic Secretary is not doing a very good job of answering the questions on the cost. Can he tell us please: in the event of no agreement on staying in the customs union or the single market, what will be the loss in productivity to businesses in the UK and in Northern Ireland specifically and how many redundancies does he expect to see in Northern Ireland and in the UK? What is the loss cost to the UK economy of the EU citizens who have chosen not to come here or who have chosen to leave as a direct result of the Brexit vote? Lastly, if he truly believes that we would be better off as a result of the UK leaving the EU without being in the customs union or the single market, can he tell us what his models say about how much better off each of us will be?

John Glen: No, I cannot give the hon. Lady a cash figure for every member of the United Kingdom, but what I can say is that the Government and the Treasury are determined to make preparations for all eventualities. That is why we are preparing 70 statutory instruments to take through this House in the event of a no deal. The EU should be very clear that we are going to be ready for all eventualities while being committed to negotiating the best possible outcome, as directed by the British people two years ago.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Of course, it is the policy of the party opposite for us to remain in the customs union forever. That is worth bearing in mind. Will my hon. Friend give a bit of detail on what work HMRC has done, in the case that we are in the customs union but outside the EU, on who determines things such as trade preferences and who runs trade defences on behalf of this country in those years?

John Glen: I can confirm to my right hon. Friend that these are matters with which the Government are engaged intensively in the negotiations at the moment. We are also working towards securing as much autonomy as possible for the British Government in the future. That is the mandate that we have been given by the British people.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister told the House a moment ago that the Government expect the negotiations on the future relationship to be concluded by December 2020. However, when the Government published their backstop proposal for Northern Ireland, they said that they expected those negotiations to be concluded at the latest by December 2021. Which of those two dates represents Government policy?

John Glen: Government policy is that we have a backstop arrangement in place to fulfil our obligations and we are in negotiation over the timings of that. The Prime Minister will be coming to the House later today and the right hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to clarify with her the answer to that question.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Can my hon. Friend inform me why he thinks that there is any incentive for the EU to give us a good deal if they think that by dragging their heels they can drag us into being obliged to pay extra money to them?

John Glen: There is no expectation that this Government will seek to pay more money to the EU. We are in negotiation, as has been set out. We have made considerable progress. We have a small number of items to resolve, but the intention is to get the best possible deal for the British taxpayer in the national interest.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister break it gently to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that, if we
[Mr Chris Leslie]

stay in the customs union and the single market—and, quite frankly, if we remain in the European Union—we will save our constituents that £81 billion that will be lost to them otherwise? That is not my calculation, but the Minister’s—the Treasury’s own calculations and forecasts from last December say that our constituents will be £81 billion worse off if we leave on the WTO terms of the right hon. Gentleman.

John Glen: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that I am not sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has a lot of faith in the Treasury on this, so I feel there is little point in taking that figure back to him.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): What businesses in my constituency want is certainty and reassurance that the border will be as frictionless as possible. This is key to many sectors of prosperity in the north-west. Will the Minister confirm that the costs involved in temporary ongoing membership of a customs union will dramatically be outweighed by the benefits to business?

John Glen: The Government have to reconcile the decision of the British people to leave the EU with, as my hon. Friend says, the need to make sure that the cost to business is as little as possible. That is why it is absolutely imperative that, when we secure the final outcome of the negotiations, it is good for business, good for the economy and good for jobs.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Could the Minister set out the extra cost to UK GDP of leaving the customs union, and the extra cost to businesses in Wokingham, in particular, of the hard Brexit favoured by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)?

John Glen: My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has spoken for himself. The reality is that, before the Government come back to the House for a meaningful vote, a whole range of data will be supplied to the House in order to make the discussion about that decision meaningful.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I am sure that my hon. Friend, who is doing an excellent job today, is, like me, an avid reader of the Conservative manifesto, which states that the withdrawal agreement and future relationship will be negotiated side by side. Ninety-five per cent. of the withdrawal agreement has been completed, which is great news. How much of the future relationship agreement has been done?

John Glen: At this stage, we are clearly in a delicate negotiation. It is important that the two are taken together, and the Prime Minister will be updating the House on our precise position in that negotiation.

Mr Speaker: I understand that the Minister’s natural courtesy inclines him to look in the direction of the person who is asking him a question, but it is helpful if he faces the House. It is not a serious sin; I am just trying to aid and counsel him in the discharge of his duties.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Government’s own statistics show that leaving with no deal would put unemployment in the north-east up to 20%. What is their calculation of the effect on unemployment in the north-east of leaving the customs union?

John Glen: There are a range of assumptions around the implications of different scenarios. The Government seek to ensure that we minimise the downsides and maximise the upsides in the agreement that we come to. I recognise that significant industries in the north-east rely on certainty in that relationship, and that is why it is very important that we get it right.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): This modest extension that is only a plan is going to cost £15.6 billion. How will the Minister explain that in Southend, Salisbury and Stockport? Could we not use the money slightly better?

John Glen: I would be in a position to justify that if it were a firm outcome of the negotiations, but it is not. I have not been conducting the negotiations; the Prime Minister has, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be able to ask her about that later.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Could I ask what the purpose of any such extension might be? Is it to replace the Irish backstop, or is it in addition to that?

John Glen: At the moment, this is an idea that has been raised. In terms of the detail of it and where it fits within negotiations, clearly the Prime Minister will be best placed to answer. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that one of the enduring principles of our negotiations is to ensure that we treat the whole United Kingdom as a single united entity. That is an enduring principle that is guiding us through these negotiations.

Mr Speaker: Succinctness as exemplified, legendarily, by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend say whether, if we stay in the customs union, any revenues that came from customs would be considered to be own resources?

John Glen: I say to my hon. Friend that we need to have a fair settlement that does the right thing by the people of this country.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Minister is doing his best to accentuate the positive, as the song goes, but he knows that the cost of Brexit is already being paid by every family and every business in this country: higher prices in the shops, a staffing crisis in the NHS and a hit to the public finances of £26 billion a year, before Brexit has even happened. Can I ask him to resist the jingoism and fantasy maths of the English nationalists in the Conservative party and remember that staying in a customs union is a red line for those of us in the Labour party? The value of not returning to a hard border—

Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me for interrupting the hon. Lady, but we have got a lot to get through, and we must make progress rather more quickly.
John Glen: I do not accept that characterisation of any of my colleagues on the Government Benches. We are seeking to secure the best deal in the national interest for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is the Minister aware that many people on the Government Benches and in the country think that £39 billion is not worth paying, let alone any more?

John Glen: I imagine that my hon. Friend—like many of his constituents—thinks that no sum is worth paying. Of course, there are a range of views on this matter, but we have to honour our obligations, as this country does, and secure a fair outcome.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Thousands of people across Merseyside, including my constituents, are employed in the automotive and aerospace sectors. Our membership of the customs union is vital for supporting jobs and investment in our regional economy. What assessment has the Treasury made of the effect of leaving the customs union on those sectors? Does the Minister agree that only staying in the customs union will ensure the future of those sectors?

John Glen: The Government have made an assessment that means it is imperative that we come out with a solution that is right for those employers in the hon. Lady’s constituency and gives the certainty that they need, because that is what her constituents will require.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I think we can agree that any extension to the transition period will be costly—£15 billion, £16 billion or whatever it is—but the problem is that we will have no MEPs to represent us, no say and no influence on any legislation introduced during that period. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be no taxation without representation?

John Glen: My right hon. Friend makes a factual point, and no doubt those conducting the negotiations will have that at the top of their mind.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Who is offering to do a short sentence? Ah, well done—Catherine West.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): There seem to be a number of questions that the Minister is not able to answer. Is his boss available, or is he also in “the killing zone”?

John Glen: I was asked to respond, and I am happy to do my best to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The extension to the transition period is designed to replace the backstop to the backstop. Given that the Irish Government and Her Majesty’s Government have both said that they are not going to build the hard border, who is?

John Glenn: We need to understand that the backstop is just that—it is not expected that it will need to come into force. We must secure an agreement and come to arrangements that work for both sides.

John Glen: We will have a considerable amount of material before the House. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who is about to come to the Dispatch Box, will have more information on that issue.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): When looking at the customs union, would it not also be wise to look at the significant benefits of being in a trading bloc of 500 million people that has delivered wealth through some 40 FTAs with some 70 countries—agreements that the Government have already said they wish to adopt if we are able to, post Brexit?

John Glen: It is important that we honour the decision of the British people and that we come out with an arrangement that gives us the optimal long-term relationship with the EU and also a chance to exploit the opportunities in the world economy beyond the EU, which is growing faster.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Last October, I asked the Chancellor in the Treasury Committee whether the benefits of feasible future trade deals outweighed the costs of leaving the single market and the customs union. He could not give me a clear response. Is the Minister any closer to giving a clear response today?

John Glen: Such an answer is dependent on so many conditions and the determination of what is in those trade deals, so I am sorry, but I cannot give a precise answer.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Is the Minister finding withdrawal from the European Union as easy and cost-free as some of those on the Government Benches behind him suggested it would be?

John Glen: Government is always challenging, and there are always issues that need to be resolved. It is self-evident that this is a challenging set of negotiations.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that the head of HMRC estimates that the cost for British business of leaving the European Union customs union would be £20 billion a year?

John Glen: I am aware of that assessment. It depends on the assumptions for the final agreement we come to, but clearly the Government are taking a range of concerned parties into account throughout this process.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): A lot has been said this afternoon about the strategic cost of Brexit, but every day thousands of civil servants are dedicating their working lives to working to the Prime Minister’s direction, yet the Prime Minister is sacrificing...
the interests of the country to try to heal the divisions in her party among those on the Conservative Benches. When are the Government going to get a grip and stop wasting taxpayers’ money on delivering the impossible?

**John Glen:** The Chancellor has made money available across-Government to help us through this process. I would acknowledge the massive contribution made by our civil service to help across many Departments of Government. The Prime Minister is committed to securing the best deal for the nation.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Leaving the customs union will cost us billions, but it is also costing dear now. Does the Minister not agree with me that, with violent crime rising, the Home Office could have done with the extra money to pay for an extra 4,500 police officers, instead of £500 million for extra customs and border officials to prepare to leave the customs union?

**John Glen:** There is a Budget next Monday, and it will be for the Chancellor to set out the spending settlement for Government Departments.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Will the Minister advise the patients of the Golden Jubilee Hospital in Clydebank in my constituency how patient they have got to be to have medicine regulation while Recardio is taking out its health clinical trials for new heart medicines?

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very sensible point about the urgency of securing a deal across lots of areas of our country, including the health service, and that is what the Government are engaged in seeking to resolve.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): The truth is that this is typical crackpottery by the Brexit extremists on the Conservative Benches, who seem to be running the show over there at the moment. Will the Minister tell us what the effect will be on the aerospace sector and on Airbus next to my constituency of leaving and being outside the customs union, as opposed to remaining in and protecting those jobs?

**John Glen:** It is in the interests of aerospace and defence industries across the country for the Government to come to the right long-term solution that secures jobs and certainty about their operating environment in the UK and for trading abroad.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): Experts have found that Wales will be hit disproportionately hard, with people and communities up and down Wales hit hardest if the UK leaves the customs union and the single market. Is the Minister prepared to make that sacrifice?

**John Glen:** The Prime Minister and the whole Government are committed to finding a solution for the whole of the United Kingdom. I recognise the different distribution of EU funds and therefore the policy challenges that will exist for the Government thereafter.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister has been asked five times to identify the figures for unemployment if we leave the customs union, so let us make it easier for him: will unemployment go up or will it go down?

**John Glen:** What I can say is that unemployment in this country is at a record low, demonstrating the coherence of this Government’s economic policy.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister looks as though he wishes he was somewhere else, and he has referred most of our questions to the Prime Minister, for which I am sure she is grateful. He must be able to answer this question: does he stand by the Treasury forecast that this country will be worse off outside the customs union, the single market and the EU?

**John Glen:** What I stand by is the desire of the Government to find the best possible solution for the United Kingdom—that maximises the advantages to the UK economy of the growth in economies outside the EU. There is a range of assumptions to a range of forecasts, and the Treasury always goes into considerable depth in setting those out clearly.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Manufacturers in my constituency need certainty, yet in recent weeks we have had a backstop, a backstop to the backstop and now an extended transition. Is not the truth that the Government’s chaotic approach to these negotiations is putting jobs at risk?

**John Glen:** We have a short amount of time to secure the best outcome for the United Kingdom. It is urgent, and I recognise that the whole country needs to have that solution.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab) rose—

**Darren Jones** (Bristol North West) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I will take the three remaining questioners if it is a short sentence from each—no more than that. I call Mrs Madeleine Moon.

**Mrs Moon:** Ford Automotive in my constituency has made it clear that frictionless trade is essential, but Canada—no matter how many pluses we put on it—is not going to work, so how will the Minister ensure that the 12,000 jobs associated with Ford are not going to be lost?

**John Glen:** We will secure that by observing the principles of the White Paper and getting the best deal through the negotiations.

**Darren Jones:** Is it not cheaper to just stay in the EU?

**John Glen:** This country voted to leave the EU by a narrow but clear majority. It is the job of Government to deliver on that.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister not accept that any firm whose operations span European supply chains will be worse off if we do not have a customs union?

John Glen: Again, that is why we have to reach a conclusion to the negotiations that leaves the United Kingdom with the best possible outcome in respect of the future economy.

Leaving the EU: Meaningful Vote

4.5 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on Her Majesty’s Government’s policy on how any motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 is to be put before the House of Commons for decision.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): May I start by welcoming the question from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve)?

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 confirmed in statute the Government’s long-standing commitment to provide Parliament with a vote on the terms of our final deal. When it comes to the motion that we consider at the point when the approval of the House is sought, the decision whether the motion is amendable or not will be a matter for you, Mr Speaker, not for the Government. However, the Government have made clear our expectation, subject to your prerogatives, that the motion will be amendable. The Government’s response, dated 10 October, to the report of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, “Parliamentary scrutiny and approval of the Withdrawal Agreement and negotiations on a future relationship”, stated:

“Of course, we accept that the Speaker may permit the tabling of amendments to the motion, as is usual convention.”

That understanding is also reflected in our response to the inquiry by the Select Committee on Procedure, which I provided on 10 October. Both responses were made publicly available on the Committees’ websites in the interests of transparency and to ensure that this House understands the Government’s position on the matter—although again, I defer to the House and to you, Mr Speaker, on procedural matters that fall within the prerogatives of the House.

It will be evident to hon. Members that any amendment to the motion would not be able to effect amendments to the withdrawal agreement or the future framework, which will have been agreed at the international level between the United Kingdom and the European Union; nor could any such amendment delay or prevent our departure from the EU as set out under article 50. It is worth reminding the House that the timing of our departure from the EU is set out in international law under article 50 of the Lisbon treaty, which this House voted to trigger.

The Government committed to giving Parliament a vote on the deal, and section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 sets out how that will happen. In passing that Act, Parliament confirmed its ultimate role in delivering on the will of the British people. Approving the final deal will be the responsibility of the House of Commons alone—a responsibility I know all hon. Members will take very seriously indeed.

Mr Grieve: While I have every sympathy with procedural problems that the Government may encounter and any honest attempt at finding a solution to them, I have to say that I find the Government’s position as stated in the memorandum they sent to the Procedure Committee entirely unsatisfactory. It departs from the plain assurances
given repeatedly to the House that we would be enabled to express a desire for alternatives when voting to reject or accept any deal.

To remind my right hon. Friend, when his predecessor, our right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), appeared in front of the Exiting the European Union Committee on 25 April, to Question 1383 from the Chair:

“Can you give an assurance that the Government’s motion on the withdrawal agreement will be amendable? Yes or no?”

our right hon. Friend replied:

“Mr Chairman, if you can tell me how to write an unamendable motion in the House of Commons, I will take a tutorial.”

Actually, one way of reading the memorandum is that that is exactly what the Government are planning to do. I might add that the promises were repeated by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on 18 April in front of the Select Committee on the Constitution, and that throughout debates on the Floor of the House in June, when we were looking at unamendable motions, no one on the Treasury Bench demurred from the oft-repeated statements that the motion on the substance of the deal would be amendable.

Could my right hon. Friend please tell the House how he can reconcile those statements with the Government’s plain submission to the Procedure Committee recommending that a vote is first taken on the Government motion and before amendments are considered? What happens if Parliament approves the Government motion, but then amends it afterwards? Are the Government suggesting that they have what they need to ratify or not? Surely the issue will be no clearer if the Government adopt their method rather than the one they are criticising.

My right hon. Friend knows that a lot in this House depends on trust. If I may say to him, the difficulty with the memorandum is that on one reading of it—I am glad to hear what he said at the Dispatch Box—it tends to undermine trust in the Government’s intention to honour the commitments they gave to the House.

Dominic Raab: I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend’s question and his comments. Let me try to address them, if I may. He fears, if I understand correctly, that the Government are in favour of an unamendable motion, but in fact, as the memorandum he cites makes clear in paragraph 4:

“The approval...will be a substantive motion”—

that was, I think, the first point he made—

“and therefore, under existing House procedures, will be amendable.”

I hope that gives him some reassurance. It is also worth pointing out the implications that we set out in paragraph 6 of the memorandum, which was published on 10 October, which is that

“due to the legal status accorded to the motion under s. 13 of the 2018 Act,”

which I know he scrutinised very carefully,

“a clear decision on approval of the motion is needed in order for the Government to be able to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement.”

Again, I hope that that makes clear what the basic challenge is.

If I understand my right hon. and learned Friend correctly, he may wish to change the terms of the agreement that has been struck. I think that would come up against very real, practical and diplomatic obstacles. So late in the day, there would not be time to revisit the negotiation. Secondly, just from a practical, diplomatic point of view, is he really suggesting that at that point we would actually be offered different or more favourable terms? I think that that is unlikely in the extreme.

It is very important that this House is presented with a very clear decision of the most meaningful sort available, which is between the terms of the best deal that the Government can negotiate and the alternative. I hope and I am sure that that will focus minds when that point comes.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

May I start by saying this: I profoundly disagree with the Prime Minister on a number of issues, including Brexit, but some of the quotes and comments about the Prime Minister this weekend, attributed to Conservative MPs, Ministers or former Ministers, are nothing short of disgraceful. In a time of growing extremism, hostility and threats to those in public life, MPs should know better. The comments are, as ever, from unnamed sources. I hope the House can agree that this kind of language has no place in our politics and has to stop.

Labour has spent 18 months campaigning for a meaningful vote and for Parliament to be properly involved in the Brexit negotiations, yet at every stage the Government’s response has been to push Parliament away. We fear that this is the latest example. Labour is clear that Parliament must be able to express its view on any deal the Prime Minister brings back, yet the Secretary of State’s letter brings that into question. Of course Labour recognises that Parliament will have to approve or disapprove of any Brexit deal—it must be a decisive decision—but it is the role of Parliament, and not the Executive, to decide how that view is to be expressed.

Labour has always believed that Parliament should be able to table, debate and vote on amendments. That is consistent with paragraph 5 of the Government’s own legal advice, which makes it clear that absent a business motion being approved by the House,

“Multiple amendments may be tabled”,

the selection of amendments and the order they are taken in is

“in the hands of the Speaker”,

and that multiple amendments can be selected. I want to be clear that Labour will not support any business motion that does not meet these criteria, and I urge the Secretary of State to think again.

Dominic Raab: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary for his comments, and I agree with him about the need for a serious, substantive debate and for the right tone for this debate. He is right that the meaningful vote needs to be a decisive decision. We set that out in the memorandum and that is what section 13 of the European
Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 provides. As the memorandum that we have published makes clear, we expect amendments to be allowed on the motion, although again, that is an issue for you, Mr Speaker. The distinction that needs to be borne in mind is between the likely impact that any procedural amendments would have on the withdrawal agreement at the international level. The shadow Brexit Secretary is far too assiduous and astute a lawyer not to know that as a matter of basic law, they could not have an effect of altering the withdrawal agreement. Also, common sense—he will know—means that it will be highly unlikely, if not impossible, for us to refer back to the negotiating table.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I gently say to the Secretary of State that of course he was in the Ministry of Justice, and in his ministerial role he helped to negotiate the passage of the Bill that eventually became the Act that is the subject of this urgent question. And I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve): this is a matter of trust, and it is quite incredible for the Secretary of State to stand up and basically say that, as a former Minister who navigated the Bill through the House, they did not understand the consequences. This is a matter of trust not just in Parliament and along the Government Benches—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows that many Members were very concerned about all of this and trusted the Government that we would have a meaningful vote—but among the people of this country, and if they think there is any breach in trust, they will not forgive this Government.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend. She will know, because it is set out in our memorandum—I know she scrutinises these things very carefully—that we are amenable, subject to the prerogatives of the Speaker and the House, to this being an amendable motion. She will also understand the need—this is why it is a meaningful vote of the very highest order—for there to be a clear decision that we are given on the deal we are confident we can strike with our EU partners, so that we know whether we can proceed to implement it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) not only for securing the urgent question but for the forensic way in which he has completely dismantled any credibility that the Government’s position may have had. I also endorse in their entirety the comments from the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), about the appalling comments that have been directed against the Prime Minister. I disagree with the Prime Minister on a lot of things, but nobody should be issued with the kind of threats that she has been expected to cope with over the last few days.

Too much of the discussion is now about who will become the next Prime Minister. The long-term career prospects for the Prime Minister, or any of us, are infinitesimally trivial compared with what will be at stake if and when this Parliament gets a chance to do its job in a meaningful vote—that means not only a meaningful motion, but that we must be able to put forward and vote on meaningful amendments before the final decision is taken.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that meaningful amendments will be allowed and that Parliament will have the opportunity to meaningfully amend the motion before we are asked to agree the final deal? Given that we are getting hour-by-hour and minute-by-minute updates on the Government’s negotiations with a select 50 or so Members of Parliament, will he tell us when the Government intend to start seeking consensus across the 600 Members of this House who are not members of the Democratic Unionist party or the European Research Group?

Dominic Raab: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, as set out in the memorandum we sent to the Procedure Committee, which has been published, there will be a substantive and amendable motion. I do not think that any hon. Member, on either side of the House, would table a meaningless amendment, so I reject the premise of the question in that regard.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that no motion of this House can overturn the two Acts of Parliament on withdrawal or the article 50 letter, which all say we are leaving on 29 March next year, and that the Government are not minded to repeal those Acts?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is right on both counts. None the less, on the meaningful vote, the motion will be substantive and amendable, and it will be for you, Mr Speaker, to decide on the scope and acceptability of those amendments.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Having read the Secretary of State’s memorandum to the Procedure Committee, and paragraph 13 in particular, may I point out to him that the Exiting the European Union Select Committee’s recommendation on amendments to the withdrawal agreement motion is that these be taken before the vote on the main question, not after? That is the issue. Will he take this opportunity to accept both that that is what the Select Committee recommended and that to order the vote in any other way would be unacceptable to many Members of this House?

Dominic Raab: I always respect the views of the Select Committee Chair, but the position is set out in the memorandum. We think it the proper course to ensure both a meaningful vote to which substantive amendments can be tabled and a clear decision on the outcome.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): When did the Secretary of State and the Government get the legal advice that told them they needed this so-called clean motion first? I do not remember, and I do not think my colleagues remember, it being the subject of any discussions with Ministers or Whips in relation to section 13. When did they get it and why did he feel it appropriate to break the news to the Procedure Committee and not Members of his own party with whom he had discussions?

Dominic Raab: We do not comment on legal advice, but obviously we took advice continually throughout the progress of the EU withdrawal Act, and the issue of section 13—the process and the need for it—and the importance of having a clear and decisive outcome to
the meaningful vote, which is the surest way to make sure it is meaningful and substantive, were discussed at length during the passage of that Act.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Secretary of State seems to be arguing that we cannot discuss any amendments in advance simply because those amendments might not be ones the Government agree with, might not give them the legal support they want or might not agree with them that there is no alternative to their motion. I am afraid they should be making those arguments when we discuss the amendments, before we discuss the main motion, in the normal way. Anything other than that is procedural ducking and diving to avoid the real substance of the debate and to avoid a meaningful vote.

Dominic Raab: I do not think there was a question there, but as the right hon. Lady will know, the selection of amendments and what the House can discuss is a matter for the Speaker. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. People can take whatever view they like, but, to be fair, the Secretary of State is always an estimably courteous individual in the Chamber, and we must hear the fella.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): When will the meaningful vote be taken? The House of Commons was promised on 19 March that there would be a meaningful vote. Where is it?

Dominic Raab: I gently refer the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) to the memorandum, which makes it clear that there will be a meaningful vote. How does it amount to Parliament gagging itself by preventing MPs from being able to amend the motion first?

Dominic Raab: I gently refer the hon. Lady to the memorandum, which makes it clear that there will be a meaningful vote. It is our view that, subject to the substantive motion. It will be, in our view, subject to amendments. What we cannot have is a vote that renders meaningless the outcome of the referendum.

Mr Speaker: There has been much reference to the Procedure Committee, of which the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) is a distinguished ornament.

Dominic Raab: I do not think that the hon. Lady was right in either of her key points. The memorandum that we published sets out very clearly that there will be a substantive motion. It will be, in our view, subject to amendments. What we cannot have is a vote that renders meaningless the outcome of the referendum.

Sir Edward Leigh: The evidence given to the Procedure Committee last week was very clear. If there is no deal under section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, there will be a vote on a neutral motion. If there is a deal, there must be a meaningful vote under section 13(1). That motion is amendable, and amendments must be taken first, unless the Government produce their own business statement, and there has to be a vote on it. That is the procedure.

The important point to understand, however, is that deal or no deal, meaningful vote passed or not, can only affect the deal; it cannot affect the outcome of Brexit, because that is in statute. Only the Government can introduce legislation, so only the Government can stop Brexit on 29 March. Will the Secretary of State therefore give an unequivocal declaration to the House that in no circumstances—deal or no deal, deal rejected by the House or accepted—will Brexit not proceed on 29 March?

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Government only agreed to a meaningful vote on the final deal to avoid a parliamentary mutiny by their own side during the passage of the withdrawal Act. The Secretary of State knows that there is no majority in this place for a no-deal Brexit, but that, by implication, is what he is committed to giving effect to the referendum and leaving the EU in March next year.
offering in his memorandum. When will he change his mind—or will there have to be another case in the Supreme Court?

Dominic Raab: It is not our intention to go for no deal. We have been working tirelessly, and we continue to work, through the October Council and into November, to get the very best deal for the country. We have made clear that we could deal with a no deal scenario, but it is a sub-optimal outcome. What we want to do is get the best deal that works for the EU and the United Kingdom—for all quarters of the country.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Come off it. Secretary of State. If a motion is amendable but not in a meaningful way, it is not a meaningful vote, and this House will not take it.

Dominic Raab: All I would gently say to my hon. Friend is that there is nothing meaningless about this vote. It would be one of the most ground-breaking decisions that the House has had to make for a generation: the decision on whether or not to accept a deal negotiated by the Government with the EU that works for all parts of the United Kingdom. I hope that at that point we would have some consensus in the House on a decision to accept the deal and move forward to the implementing legislation.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Let us cut to the chase. The Government have tried to gag Parliament at every turn in this process. Now they have a choice. The position that the Secretary of State is trying to take is, essentially, that it is no deal versus the deal that the Government have. That is not politically, constitutionally or morally sound. Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), will the Secretary of State tell us whether he took legal advice, when he took it, and who commissioned it? Was it him?

Dominic Raab: I have not commissioned any specific, bespoke legal advice on the point the hon. Gentleman raises, but we have been informed right the way through about the implications. Section 13 of the withdrawal Act was informed by legal advice not just from Government lawyers, but from all the lawyers across the House. It was scrutinised very carefully and at length in Committee, and it will give effect to what the House voted through in the Act.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As I understand it, all votes in this House are meaningful—that is my first point. My second point is that the Act states that the House will vote on whether or not the withdrawal agreement should stand. I might be voting against that agreement, but it will be the meaningful vote. Amendments would then follow, if that motion was lost.

Dominic Raab: Subsections (4) to (6) of section 13 set out the process, which includes the Government coming back to Parliament in a no deal scenario—it is all set out very clearly in the legislation and amplified in the memorandum that we have provided to the Committee.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Why does the Secretary of State not just confess that he has been caught red-handed trying to stitch up Parliament, again? It is the same as the way the Government would not publish papers or share the impact assessments. They tried to grab Henry VIII powers at every possible twist and turn. They certainly will not let the public have a final say. Now he is trying to fix the arrangements so that we have amendments coming after a motion. He knows that the meaningful vote is in the legislation—it is the law. It is Parliament that decided that, and we fought very hard for that outcome. He should not undermine that or recant when it is MPs’ duty to have that meaningful vote.

Dominic Raab: MPs will have their say in the meaningful vote. They have scrutinised at length every stage of the Brexit process. Of course, it is not for the Government or any Minister to set out which amendments are allowed; that will be for Mr Speaker to decide. We have made it clear that we not only accept but welcome the fact that we will have a substantive motion, and of course that means it should be amendable.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Once the Brexit deal has been secured, how long will it be before we move on to the meaningful vote, keeping in mind that Select Committees, for instance, will want to look at the terms of the deal in order to advise other hon. Members?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We obviously want to bring forward the meaningful vote expeditiously, because that will give us proper time for scrutiny of all the legislation, but there must be time for the relevant Select Committees, and indeed every hon. Member of the House, to scrutinise it carefully. We are a little dependent on the time it takes us to negotiate the deal, but I will certainly bear in mind the important point he has made.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The reality is that the Government promised the House a meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, and now they are trying to backtrack and say that it is take it or leave it, in an attempt to bully MPs into accepting whatever they manage to cobble together. The Secretary of State’s predecessor said:

“Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion...is or is not amendable.”—[Official Report, 21 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 13W] Can he confirm that it is also for the Speaker to determine the order of those motions, and the order of any amendments? If he does not think that is the case, will he publish the legal advice that says the contrary?

Dominic Raab: It is not for Ministers to determine the ambit, remit or scope of the prerogatives of the Speaker or this House, although we will of course respect them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Brexit Secretary has said that he needs the negotiations to be finished by the end of November. If he reaches that target, will the House vote on deal or no deal before or after Christmas?

Dominic Raab: My remarks were just reflecting the practical challenges, on both sides, for example in implementing legislation in the UK, but obviously there
is a degree of flexibility to ensure that we have a meaningful vote and that there is as much time for legislative scrutiny and that the right balance is struck.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will call a very small number of Members now, but colleagues will also have an opportunity to question the Prime Minister, who is always very committed to the House.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What does the Secretary of State think the consequences would be if a majority in this House opposed the deal, opposed no deal and perhaps in those circumstances even supported a people's vote if the Government tried to thwart the will of this House being expressed and implemented?

**Dominic Raab:** We do not support a second referendum.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): In December last year this House voted for a meaningful vote on the final deal, and we have subsequently, and again today, been reassured that any amendments to the motion on the subject of the deal will be a matter for the Speaker. Indeed, just last week the Prime Minister replied to me that in the case of no deal, the matter would come back to this House for us to agree on next steps. Why is the Secretary of State now undoing all those good assurances by suggesting that Parliament will have only a token role in all this? Does he not accept that this is a serious breach of trust? I ask again why he sought to communicate this change to the Procedure Committee before the MPs in this House.

**Dominic Raab:** There is nothing tokenistic about the meaningful vote set out under section 13, which will be on the deal that we do with the European Union—good for the UK and good for the EU—or the alternative, which is to leave the EU without that deal. The procedure that my hon. Friend refers to is clearly spelled out in section 13. The memorandum to which she referred was not somehow snuck out; it was given at the request of the Procedure Committee and made public so that every hon. Member could see it.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): A number of parliamentarians are trying to establish whether article 50 can be unilaterally revoked. The Court of Justice of the European Union will hear that question on 27 November. If it says that article 50 can be revoked, does the Secretary of State accept that it would be open to this House to amend the Government’s motion, ordaining them to take whatever action is necessary to revoke article 50 and get us out of this unholy mess?

**Dominic Raab:** The Government have no intention of supporting a second referendum or the revocation of article 50.

**Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): For the sake of absolute clarity, will the Secretary of State confirm either that the motion described in section 13 is neutral or that Standing Orders could be disapplied?

**Dominic Raab:** The technical answer to my hon. Friend’s question is set out at some length in the memorandum, but if there is any doubt about it, he can write to me and I would be happy to give him further clarification.

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Institute for Government recommends that we have at least five days to discuss the deal that the Government reach with the EU. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that we will have at least five days for those debates?

**Dominic Raab:** We will have as much time as we possibly can, but the hon. Lady will know that this will in part be predicated on the time it takes to close the deal. We are confident that the remaining obstacles are narrowing and that we can get a good deal, but this will be at least partly determined by the length of time it takes to secure the end of the negotiations, and that depends on the EU as well.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): You do not need to be a procedural junkie or one of the many historians in this House to know that here we vote on the amendments first. Can the Secretary of State give us any example at all of the House voting on the amendments second?

**Dominic Raab:** The simple answer is that I am not sure, but I can tell the hon. Lady that we will have a substantive motion and that it will be subject to amendments, which will be for the Speaker to decide on.

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s memorandum justifies the ordering involving the substantive motion coming first, which is highly unusual, on the basis of Standing Order No. 31, which relates to Opposition day motions. On what planet could this motion be described as an Opposition day motion?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Gentleman may well be an expert on the Standing Orders, but I would say to him that on the substance of the issue, this is clear. There will be a clear decision for this House to accept the deal we negotiate with the EU or to leave the EU with no deal. I know which side I will be on in that debate. We are confident that we can get a good deal, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will row behind it.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State understand that for many in this House the only genuinely meaningful vote is one that allows MPs to vote for the deal or to vote to stay in the European Union, and one that must be ratified in the people’s vote demanded by 700,000 people on Saturday?

**Dominic Raab:** We had that vote; it was in 2016 and the people decided to leave.

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Ind): Is it not in the hands of the House of Commons to decide whether it wants a meaningful vote? We have Back-Bench time. I will be seeking time, with support across the House, to pass a motion that says that, if we do not approve of the Government’s final position, the fallback position will be Norway and Canada, and that we will not pay money until the agreement is through.
Dominic Raab: It is not for me to decide what procedures or motions the House puts forward, but I repeat the point I made earlier: we have had 11 votes on potential single market customs union variations to the negotiating strategy, and the Government won each and every one of them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues. My normal practice is to call everybody, but there are constraints of time and we must now move on. People will have the opportunity to question the Prime Minister.

October EU Council

4.40 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I turn to the European Council, I am sure the whole House will join me in condemning the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the strongest possible terms. We must get to the truth of what happened. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will make a statement shortly.

On the European Council, in addition to Brexit, there were important discussions on security and migration. First, at last Monday’s Foreign Ministers meeting, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his French counterpart secured agreement on a new EU sanctions regime on the use of chemical weapons. At this Council, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and I argued that we should also accelerate work on further measures, including sanctions, to respond to and deter cyber-attacks. The attempted hacking of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague earlier this year was a stark example of the very real threats we face. We must impose costs on all those who seek to do us harm, regardless of the means they use. This Council agreed to take that work forward.

Secondly, in marking Anti-Slavery Day, I welcomed the continued commitment of all EU leaders to work together to eliminate the barbaric crime of people trafficking. We reaffirmed our shared commitments to do more to tackle the challenges of migration upstream.

Following the Council, I met Premier Li of China, President Moon of South Korea and Prime Minister Lee of Singapore at the ASEM summit. Since 2010, our trade with Asia has grown by almost 50%, more than with any other continent in the world. I want to develop that even further. Indeed, the ability to develop our own new trade deals is one of the great opportunities of Brexit. At the ASEM summit, we discussed how the UK can build the most ambitious economic partnerships with all our Asian partners as we leave the European Union. We also agreed to deepen our co-operation across shared threats to our security.

Turning to Brexit, let me begin with the progress we have made on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. As I reported to the House last Monday, the shape of the deal across the vast majority of the withdrawal agreement is now clear. Since Salzburg, we have agreed the broad scope of provisions that set out the governance and dispute resolution arrangements for our withdrawal agreement, and we have developed a protocol relating to the UK sovereign base areas in Cyprus. Following discussions with Spain, and in close co-operation with the Government of Gibraltar, we have developed a protocol and a set of underlying memoranda relating to Gibraltar, heralding a new era in our relations. We also have broad agreement on the structure and scope of the future relationship, with important progress made on issues such as security, transport and services.

This progress in the last three weeks builds on the areas where we have already reached agreement: citizens’ rights, the financial settlement and the implementation period; and, in Northern Ireland, agreement on the preservation of the particular rights of UK and Irish citizens, and on the special arrangements between us such as the common travel area, which has existed since before either the UK or Ireland ever became members of the European Economic Community.
Taking all of that together, 95% of the withdrawal agreement and its protocols are now settled. There is one real sticking point left, but a considerable one, which is how we guarantee that, in the unlikely event that our future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, there is no return to a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The commitment to avoiding a hard border is one that this House emphatically endorsed and enshrined in law in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. As I set out last week, the original backstop proposal from the EU was one we could not accept, as it would mean creating a customs border down the Irish sea and breaking up the integrity of our United Kingdom. I do not believe that any UK Prime Minister could ever accept this, and I certainly will not.

As I said in my Mansion House speech, we chose to leave and we have a responsibility to help find a solution, so earlier this year we put forward a counterproposal for a temporary UK-EU joint customs territory for the backstop. In a substantial shift in its position since Salzburg, the EU is now actively working with us on this proposal, but a number of issues remain.

The EU argues that it cannot give a legally binding commitment to a UK-wide customs arrangement in the withdrawal agreement, so its original proposal must remain a possibility. Furthermore, people are understandably worried that we could get stuck in a backstop that is designed to be only temporary. There are also concerns that Northern Ireland could be cut off from accessing its most important market, Great Britain.

During last week’s council I had good discussions with Presidents Juncker, Tusk and Macron, Chancellor Merkel and Taoiseach Varadkar, and others, about how to break this impasse. I believe there are four steps we need to take.

First, we must make the commitment to a temporary UK-EU joint customs territory legally binding so that the Northern Ireland-only proposal is no longer needed. This would protect relations not only north-south but, in a substantial shift in its position since Salzburg, the EU is now actively working with us on this proposal, but a number of issues remain.

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4.51 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement, and I am pleased she has condemned the horrific murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. But condemnation is not enough; what matters now is what action the Government are prepared to take. Will they now end arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

Moving on to Brexit, I hope our debate today will be conducted without some of the language reported in the press over the weekend. I have to say that every word on Brexit was anticipated: a mixture of failure, denial and delusion. The Conservative party has spent the past two years arguing with itself, instead of negotiating a sensible deal in the public interest. Even at this crucial point, they are still bickering among themselves. The Prime Minister says that 95% of the deal is done, but previously she had told us that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”.

Which is it?

The Government’s Brexit negotiations have been a litany of missed deadlines and shambolic failure, and now they are begging for extra time. They promised that the interim agreement would be done by October 2017 and then by December 2017, but it was finally agreed in March 2018. The Prime Minister even missed the deadline for publishing her own Government’s White Paper on Brexit. She said it would be published by the end of June, but it arrived in mid-July, lacking any clarity on the key issues. Crucially, it arrived after the EU summit at which Britain’s proposals were supposed to have been tabled. And just last week, the Government missed their October deadline for agreeing to the terms of the exit deal with the EU—instead the Prime Minister went to Brussels to beg for an extension. The EU had already offered to convene a special summit in November to help the Prime Minister, but it now seems this has been withdrawn as she will not be ready by then either and so now December is being talked about. And the Prime Minister claims her extension of the transition period will be for only “a matter of months”. Is that three? Is that six? Is that 12? Is that 18? How many months is it?

We have had two and a half years watching the Tories’ failure to negotiate. Now even the Prime Minister is begging with the EU to work out how to do it. It does not sound like taking back control; it sounds like a Government and a Prime Minister who are losing control.

The Government are terminally incompetent, hamstrung by their own divisions. The Prime Minister of Lithuania summed up the situation pretty succinctly when he said:

“We do not know what they want, they do not know themselves what they really want—that is the problem.”

I am sure—[Interruption.]—

Mr Speaker: Order. There was too much noise when the Prime Minister was addressing the House. Mr Opperman, not only are you a distinguished barrister and a Minister of the Crown, but you are a graduate of the University of Buckingham in my constituency. I cannot believe that you were taught to behave in that way—chuntering noisily from a sedentary position—by lecturers in my constituency.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sure the whole House would love to hear the Government’s precise and detailed blueprint. Perhaps when she returns to the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister could set out her plan. The whole country is waiting for a plan that works for Britain, not another fudge—kicking the can down the road to keep her party in power.

Much of the current impasse is due to the Northern Ireland border—hardly an issue that can have come as a surprise to the Government. There is a simple solution—a comprehensive customs union with the EU, a solution that would not only benefit Northern Ireland, but help to safeguard skilled jobs in every region and nation of Britain, and with no hard border in Ireland, no hard border down the Irish Sea and good for jobs in every region and nation. That is a deal that could command majority support in this House and the support of businesses and unions. It is Labour’s plan—a comprehensive customs union with a real say for Britain and with no race to the bottom on regulations, standards and rights. The alternative is no deal: it is a workable plan.

The Government do not even trust their own Back Benchers to have a meaningful vote, with the Brexit Secretary submitting a letter that told us that we must choose between a disastrous no deal and the Government’s deal—a deal that does not yet exist and for which there is now no deadline.

Brexit was supposed to be about taking back control. That is what much of the Cabinet campaigned for, and where have we ended up? Parliament is being denied the chance to take back control and, because of the Government’s vacillation, five years on from the referendum we could still be paying into the EU but with no MEPs, no seat at the Council of Ministers, no Commissioners and no say for this country. Instead of taking back control, they are giving away our say and paying for the privilege. What an utter shambles! Having utterly failed to act in the public interest, will the Prime Minister do so now and make way for a Government that can and will?

The Prime Minister: There was an awful lot in the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about process, but not much about substance, and what Labour actually wants to see. It is incumbent on all of us in public life to be careful about the language we use. There are passionate beliefs and views on this and other subjects, but whatever the subject we should all be careful about our language.

The right hon. Gentleman said a lot about process, as I said, and at one point he seemed to be asking us to set out our plan. I have to say to him that we set out our plan in the White Paper of more than 100 pages back in the summer. He talks about a future relationship of a customs union, but whatever future relationship we have,
The Prime Minister: we do have to deal with the backstop issue. Without a backstop in the withdrawal agreement, there will be no withdrawal agreement. Without the withdrawal agreement, there will be no future relationship—nothing is agreed until everything is agreed—so it does not matter what future relationship we want, we still need to deal with this backstop issue.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman’s position has been that no deal is not acceptable in any circumstances. That means accepting any deal that the European Union wants to give us, including a deal that would carve Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom. Perhaps, though, his shadow Chancellor, who made the comment that he was longing for a United Ireland, might actually welcome that.

I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, throughout all this, all we have seen from the Labour party and from him is them playing politics with this issue. One minute, they want to accept the referendum, the next they want a second referendum. One minute, they want to say that free movement will end, the next they say that free movement is still on the table. One minute, they want to do trade deals, the next they want to be in a customs union that will stop them doing trade deals. He is doing everything he can to frustrate Brexit and trigger a general election. He has voted against sufficient progress, he has tried to block the withdrawal Act, and he has vowed to oppose any deal that the Government bring back. I am looking and working for the right deal in the national interests of this country; he is putting politics ahead of the national interest.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend has stated: “We will not have truly left the European Union”—

I emphasise the words “truly” and “left the European Union”—

“if we are not in control of our own laws.”

Chequers is still on the table. Its common rulebook allows the other 27 EU countries in their Council of Ministers to make our laws for goods and agricultural products with no transcript and no effective veto and undermines the total repeal of the European Communities Act 1972. How can she possibly claim that we will be in control of our own laws and sustain the national interest?

The Prime Minister: May I say to my hon. Friend that, yes, we have proposed that common rulebook? They are rules that our manufacturers say that they will be abiding by in any case. It has been a pretty stable rulebook for many years. However, it is not correct to say that there will not be a parliamentary lock on those rules. Yes, the process of determining any change to those rules will be up to the European Union, but some of those are international standards and we will, as an independent member of the international standards bodies, have a say in relation to those rules. Parliament will have a lock. We have been clear about that and we set it out in the proposals published after the Chequers meeting in July that any decision to accept or to diverge from those rules—there is a process about determining materiality—will be one that is taken by this Parliament.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance notice of her statement today. I share with her the remarks that she made about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, but may I say that the time has come to take action against Saudi Arabia? Prime Minister, stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Do it today.

Rarely have I listened to a prime ministerial statement meet with such stony faces. Prime Minister, I have some advice: if you are looking for support, do not look behind you. The Prime Minister returns to the House today from Brussels utterly humiliated. As the clock ticks down, with just a few short months before the UK is scheduled to leave the EU and with Chequers shredded, the UK has no plan to break the impasse and no plan as we head ever closer to the cliff edge. Why? Because the Prime Minister is humiliated and hamstrung by the extreme Brexiteers in her own party.

The EU 27 speak with one clear voice; the Conservative Government squabble among themselves. The divisions within the Tory party are paralysing the UK Government. The extreme Brexiteers on the Government Benches are holding the UK to ransom, leading us all to the brink of a catastrophic no deal.

The Prime Minister comes before us today with nothing but jargon and rhetoric. It is crystal clear that the EU will not accept any deal that does not include the backstop for Northern Ireland. Those who attempt to wreck the backstop will be responsible for the no deal Brexit. The EU is not bluffing.

The comments from Tory MPs in the papers this weekend, using crass and violent language in relation to the negotiations, are abhorrent and irresponsible. Those responsible need to withdraw them and apologise—

[Interruption.] Such language has no part to play in our public discourse, and it is disappointing that when the threats of violence against the Prime Minister are talked about, all we hear is background noise and a lack of understanding of the seriousness of the situation. Those Members should be ashamed of themselves. Threats of violence against the Prime Minister or anyone else must be called out and those responsible must be held to account. The Prime Minister must face them down, and she will have our support in that.

The Prime Minister must act to protect jobs and living standards by ensuring that we stay in the customs union and the single market. No more games. I ask her to focus her attention now on securing a deal that delivers economic protection. Will she ensure that any extended transition period must be for a clear purpose and confirm to the House today that her Government will support the Northern Ireland backstop, to avoid a no deal Brexit? Will she also commit to giving the Scottish Parliament a say in the outcome of the negotiations?

Finally, may I ask the Prime Minister to make it her immediate objective to keep us in the single market and the customs union, to focus her attentions on that and to acknowledge that she will not get any deal through this Parliament that stops short of the economic protection of jobs and living standards?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I said in response to the Leader of the Opposition, that I think it is important that those of us in public life all consider the language that we use.

There seemed to be some confusion in what the right hon. Gentleman was saying about the backstop. The Government are clear that we are negotiating for a
backstop in the withdrawal agreement. The question is what the terms of that backstop are. As I have said and as I repeated in my statement, the backstop as proposed by the EU, which would effectively create that customs border down the Irish sea, is not acceptable to the UK Government, hence other proposals have been put forward. We have, as I have said, made significant progress since Salzburg in working with the European Union, particularly on the UK-EU-wide customs territory.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to find a deal that protects jobs, and that is exactly what we have proposed to the European Union—a proposal that protects our economy, protects jobs and ensures that we continue to have a good trading relationship with the European Union, while also being able to develop new trading relationships and improve trading relationships with other countries around the rest of the world.

What is important as we look ahead to getting the deal is that although the right hon. Gentleman seems to think that the only issue that could lead to a no deal is not having a backstop in the withdrawal agreement—certainly if there is no withdrawal agreement and no future relationship, there is no deal; we are still at the closing stages of the negotiations and nobody knows absolutely what the result will be—we have to ensure that although, as I think, the best outcome for the UK is a good deal, we continue to prepare for the possibility of no deal. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that what we will not be doing is following the example of the SNP, who want to put Scotland back into the European Union and back into the common fisheries policy, which is not in the interests of Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A very large number of right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, but I remind the House that there is a further statement to follow, that coming from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and the remaining stages of a Bill, so there is a premium on brevity, to be exemplified first by Mr John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What advantages does the Prime Minister expect to get in the future partnership arrangement that will be better than leaving and spending the £39 billion at home, with a huge boost to our economy and public services?

The Prime Minister: I believe that a future partnership that protects jobs and ensures that we have a good trading relationship with the European Union is worth negotiating for and worth achieving for the United Kingdom. There are many who say to me in this House that we want to ensure that we have good trading relationships on better than WTO deals around the rest of the world. I agree that having those good trading relationships on better than WTO deals is a good thing, and that is what I want to achieve with the European Union.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I add my condemnation of the abuse directed at the Prime Minister. The Times, and The Times this morning, reported that Whitehall, including the Brexit Department, is now carrying out contingency planning for a people’s vote. Can the Prime Minister elaborate and confirm that this has ministerial endorsement?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not correct. The Government do not support a second referendum.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that should her deal fail to secure support in this House with no further road left in negotiations, so that there is parliamentary gridlock, the only and inevitable way forward—whether we like it or not—will be to allow people to decide via either a second referendum or a general election? The former would surely be preferable to the latter.

The Prime Minister: I recognise from other questions that my right hon. Friend has asked me that there is a difference of view between us on the issue of a second referendum. The people voted in 2016—they had that people’s vote—and they decided to leave the European Union. I believe it is our duty—I believe it is part of the issue of trust and integrity of politicians—to deliver on what people voted for and leave the European Union.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Our position is that the backstop is not necessary, and that it is damaging. The EU has made it clear that the backstop is designed to keep Northern Ireland as part of the customs union territory of the EU. The Prime Minister gave an assurance in the withdrawal agreement that any such backstop and regulatory barriers would have to have the support of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Is that still her position?

The Prime Minister: We did put that out in the joint report, and we stand by what we put in that joint report. It is precisely that suggestion from the European Union—that Northern Ireland be kept in a customs union while the rest of the United Kingdom has a different relationship with the European Union—that this Government have rejected, because we want to ensure that we leave the European Union as one United Kingdom.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I join other colleagues in utterly condemning the use of language that we saw at the weekend, in the fond hope that we will not see any such language in the future. At the start of the Prime Minister’s statement, she talked about the work that had been done on cyber-security and the OPCW. I remain very concerned about the progress that is being made on the security treaty to enable us to maintain high levels of security when we leave the European Union, so that we can continue to keep British citizens, and indeed EU citizens throughout Europe, safe.

The Prime Minister: I hope to reassure my right hon. Friend by saying that we have been making good progress on the issue of internal and, indeed, external security arrangements for our future relationship with the European Union, although discussions and negotiations are still being undertaken to ensure that we can retain the operational capabilities that enable us to work not only to keep our citizens safe, but to keep citizens across the EU safe.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Economic Secretary invited me earlier to put this question to the Prime Minister, so I will. He told the House that he expected the negotiations on the future partnership to
be concluded by December 2020. The Prime Minister has just spoken about a short extension of the implementation period, but the Government said back in June, when they published their backstop proposals, that they expected the future arrangements to be in place by the end of December 2021. Could the Prime Minister tell the House which of those dates represents the Government view? If she wants to continue the game of pass the parcel with the question, will she encourage the Brexit Secretary to keep the promise he made to the Brexit Committee to come and give evidence to us after the October European Council?

The Prime Minister: We are working for and expect to have agreed the terms of the future relationship by the end of December 2020, such that the future relationship can come into place on 1 January 2021. When we published the temporary customs arrangement as the customs proposal for the backstop on Northern Ireland in June, we said that, if it were necessary for that backstop to come into place, because for some reason that future relationship could not come into place on 1 January 2021, we would expect that to last no longer than the end of December 2021.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): First, may I say that I concur with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd)? I believe that most Members on the Government Benches and, indeed, in the House utterly condemn and regard with disdain the tone of some of the language used at the weekend.

Is it not the case that talk of a second referendum at this crucial stage in the negotiations can only undermine the Prime Minister’s negotiating position? Will she carry on, ignore the siren voices and get the best deal she can for the people of this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye for their comments in relation to certain language that has been used.

I agree that it is important, at this stage of the negotiations, that the European Union is in no doubt that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March next year and that we are negotiating our withdrawal agreement and our future relationship. My determination is to put the national interest first and get a good deal for the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I have seen a number of scripts around the House of prepared questions. Given the level of interest, may I gently say that, if a colleague has a question of more than 50 words, the device that I would recommend is the use of the blue pencil?

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister and I have had many disagreements on many things, but I stand with her completely against the violent, dehumanising and, frankly, misogynistic language that we have heard. I hope the whole House will condemn it, because it demeans every single one of us.

The Prime Minister has previously said that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Can she tell the House what proportion of the future partnership agreement she thinks has been reached?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments about the use of language.

The position we are in is that 95% of the withdrawal agreement has been agreed, as I said, and a substantial part of the future relationship in relation to security, services, transport and other issues has been agreed, in terms of the structure and scope of that future relationship. The point is that none of this is finally agreed until leaders look at the package and agree the whole package together, hence nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Mr Speaker: Brevity himself, Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The original technical proposal and the facilitated customs agreement have both been rejected, so what can the Prime Minister conceive that might be brought forward to solve the Northern Ireland problem in the next two or even three years?

The Prime Minister: Actually, those two have not both been completely rejected, as my right hon. Friend suggests. In fact, as I said, we have made substantial progress, and there has been a substantial shift from the EU since Salzburg in agreeing to look at the arrangements for a UK-EU-wide customs backstop, which was exactly what we put forward in the TCA.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Aren’t the hard facts that the European Union will not agree anything that is not in its interests, the Cabinet is split three ways, the House is split at least seven ways, and in terms of any solution the Prime Minister comes up with, half the country will think she has gone too far and the other half will think she has not gone far enough? When will she realise that she has completely lost control of the situation?

The Prime Minister: I think, from the discussions that I have with members of the public on this issue, that the majority of them, regardless of how they voted in the referendum, now have a very simple message to all of us in the House, which is: “Let’s just get on with it and leave the EU.”

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): As we enter the final furlong, with 95% of the agreement reached, does the Prime Minister agree that it has been a cool and calculated approach that has led to this progress? Is it not now time, in the interests of all the businesses in Britain, which want as smooth and frictionless trade as possible, to kick on and get this agreement? Does she agree that it might even be necessary to take the whip out—all within the rules, of course—and push this further, because we have to reach this agreement as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. We should get on and focus on the end point of this, which is getting the agreement, getting a good deal for the UK and enabling us to leave on those good terms.
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Prime Minister be clear that she is abandoning the promise of a deal that delivers the exact same benefits, particularly as far as services are concerned, and will she acknowledge that that is yet another pledge that has been broken and therefore yet another reason for a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady looks at the various speeches that I have given throughout this process, I have been clear that there would be differences and there would be changes in our relationship with the EU. There will be, but what we are doing is proposing a good relationship with the European Union—a good trading relationship and a good security relationship—which I believe is in the interests of the UK.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The person or persons who directed violent language at my right hon. Friend have thoroughly disgraced themselves. I very much hope that they are discovered and that she will withdraw the Whip from them. What acceleration has been made on preparations for no deal since July?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the support. He has made about the language that was used at the weekend. Significant progress has been made on the no-deal preparations since July, and I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he did on those when he was in the Exiting the EU Department. One can see some of the progress not only from legislation that has been passed in this House, but from the technical notices that have been issued, which have been a crucial part of ensuring that businesses and others outside the Government are aware of what is necessary in a no-deal situation.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Government do seem to have got themselves into a bit of a hole, so it is understandable that they wish to avoid parliamentary scrutiny, but can the Prime Minister not see that attempting to render any vote in Parliament meaningless is the very thing that lends weight to the call for a people’s vote? Would she not prefer the reassurance of going back to the people to ask them if her deal, or any deal, is what they voted for in 2016?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that the motion will be an amendable motion, but actually there is a key here: if you went out and asked members of the public what they think MPs should be voting on, I think they would say that they would expect MPs to be able to vote on the deal that the Government bring back from the European Union.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The only politicians’ vote would be one which confined to deny this House a meaningful say and ignored the 700,000 people who walked past the Prime Minister’s door at the weekend to demand a people’s vote. That is because it is important that everyone has the chance to weigh up the evidence, look at the pros and cons of the actual deal and actually give their informed consent before we undertake this major constitutional, economic and social surgery.

The Prime Minister: On the term “people’s vote”, we must accept across this House that we gave the people a vote on this issue, there was a people’s vote, people voted in larger numbers than they had done before and they voted to leave the European Union. My hon. Friend, like me, will I am sure be concerned about ensuring that the people actually can have some faith in their politicians, and that means our politicians delivering on the vote of the people, not telling them to think again.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister give the House an example of a greater voluntary surrender of sovereignty than the transition deal that she now proposes to extend?

The Prime Minister: First, I am not standing here proposing to extend the transition period or the implementation period. What I am doing is saying, how can we ensure that we have a choice of backstop options to ensure there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in the unlikely circumstances that such a backstop is required? That is the basis on which this other proposal has been put forward, alongside the proposal for a UK-EU-wide customs territory, such as the Government first put forward in June.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been described as a “bloody difficult” person. I have always found her a very determined person—determined to deliver on the people’s vote that has already taken place. Will she tell us whether she expects the final recommendations to come at 4 am, on another early plane journey, like last time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and say to him that all too often European negotiations end in the early hours of the morning. We shall work to ensure that we do this in a timely fashion, recognising that we need to get legislation through this House and on the statute book by 29 March next year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that, on Friday, I was speaking in Belfast’s wonderful Titanic centre? Standing there, I was reminded of that fateful journey where the navigation was got wrong, the captain got it wrong, and all the people on that ship ended in the sea. May I urge her to think again about the direction of the negotiations? The purpose of the negotiations is to keep our country safe, secure and sound. Unlike the people behind her, I support her when she does well in Brussels. Go for it and get us a good deal!

The Prime Minister: Going for it and getting us a good deal is exactly what I am working on.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I have no doubt at all that the Prime Minister thinks of every individual person in this country when she is negotiating the best possible deal, but I fail to understand how it can be a politicians’ vote when nearly 700,000 members of the public took to the streets to display their dissatisfaction. I ask her again: what will she do if we come to the position of no deal, which will not get through this House? What other options are there?

The Prime Minister: We should all recall that, in the vote that took place in 2016, larger numbers of people voted than we had ever seen voting before, and the decision was to leave the European Union. We have set
out in legislation the process that will be followed by the Government if we are in the situation where a deal brought back from the European Union by the Government and put to this House is rejected by this House.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It has been so disappointing to hear the Prime Minister be so dismissive of the 700,000 people from across our country who took to the streets on Saturday to demand a people’s vote on the final deal. What does she say to the thousands of young people who led that march but who did not get a say two years ago, whose future will be most adversely affected if she ploughs on with her disastrous plans?

The Prime Minister: What I say to young people is that this Government are working to get a good deal that will ensure that they have a great future in this country outside the European Union.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): During the implementation period, the UK would be subject to all EU rules, including on freedom of movement. Why then does my right hon. Friend continue to rule out membership of the European economic area and the European Free Trade Association as an alternative interim state?

The Prime Minister: What we are of course looking at in relation to the proposals that have been put forward is for a limited period to have the backstop that ensures no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The two proposals that have been put forward deliver on that. Where it would come to the situation, as proposed, where it was a sovereign choice for the UK, of course decisions would have to be taken about the wider issues in terms of the exact arrangements for those proposals, but the key thing is for those proposals to ensure that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Prime Minister, Chequers is dead, parliamentary maths mean that the current proposal being considered by the EU is dead, and no deal is dead because there is a pragmatic majority in this House that will prevent this economic and social catastrophe for our communities. Will she now switch to EFTA, EEA and time-limited membership of the customs union? History is always kinder to leaders who act in the national interest.

The Prime Minister: I seem to recall the hon. Gentleman asking me a very similar question last Monday, and I am afraid he is not going to get a different answer today. We are working for a good deal in terms of leaving the European Union and ensuring that we have a trading deal that protects jobs in this country.

Mr Speaker: As I often observe, repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Will the backstop have the same legal status as a treaty? Will the agreement have the same legal status as a treaty?

The Prime Minister: Yes. The backstop for Northern Ireland will be part of the protocol that is attached to the withdrawal agreement, and the withdrawal agreement would have the status of a treaty.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Earlier this year, this House voted to stay in the European Medicines Agency, with all that means for the rest of the relationship with the EU. Can I take it, from the Prime Minister’s statement that 95% of the deal is agreed, that we are indeed staying in the EMA?

The Prime Minister: The 95% relates to the withdrawal agreement. We have agreed much of the structure and scope of the future partnership. Staying in the European Medicines Agency is one of the proposals we put forward as part of the plan that came out after the Chequers meeting, our proposals for the future. That is part of the future partnership, not the withdrawal agreement.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate the frustration felt by many of my constituents and others that it is now over two years since the referendum and we have agreed that we will not regain control of our laws, borders and money for over four years after the referendum? Does she understand that for many of them and us that is already too long?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely understand. Some people have said to me that we should not have triggered article 50 when we did. I think it was important that we triggered it when we did. We took time to prepare, but then triggered it precisely in order to get this process into place. My right hon. Friend will know the process within article 50 is for two years. That is why we will leave the EU on 29 March 2019. What we are working to ensure is that we get the future relationship in place at the end of that implementation period, an implementation period that I believe was right and necessary to negotiate to ensure that for both citizens and businesses there were not two cliff-edges in the changed relationship with the EU, but we have a smooth and orderly withdrawal and movement into the future partnership.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Can the Prime Minister explain why, if she really has the interests of the people of Northern Ireland in her heart, she recently did not allow the joint leaders who backed remain in Northern Ireland to meet with her? Between them, they represent the majority of voters in Northern Ireland. Is it because she does not want to hear what they have to say because, inconveniently, it does not agree with what she wants?

The Prime Minister: Both I and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland meet the leaders of all the parties in Northern Ireland and discuss with them a number of issues, including Brexit.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): A significant number of the 700,000 people who marched for a people’s vote on Saturday were people who run or own their own businesses. They are in a state of despair because they need certainty and they do not have certainty. Two and a half years ago they were told there would be a trade deal in place before we left. Now we are told we will be
lucky if we get it in two years. Is this not the truth: the Government’s policy is for us to be in a never-ending transition period to a destiny that is completely unknown, over which we have no say and no control? That is something nobody voted for.

The Prime Minister: No, that is not the Government’s position, that is not what the Government have proposed and that is not what the Government are working on in the negotiations with the European Union. My right hon. Friend is right in saying that business wants certainty as soon as it can have that certainty. That is why we are continuing to work to ensure we can complete the final negotiations—so that business will be able to see what the future deal is and what the future relationship with the European Union will be.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): On Saturday, more than 700,000 people marched peacefully on Parliament and reasonably requested a people’s vote on the final deal. May I urge the Prime Minister to listen to those reasonable voices and resist the thuggish and brutish deal. May I urge the Prime Minister to listen to those reasonable voices and resist the thuggish and brutish deal?

The Prime Minister: I have answered that question on a number of occasions already this afternoon. I believe it is right that we gave the people the vote in 2016. They voted to leave and we will deliver on that.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition spoke of fudge and shambles, but his policy of leaving the EU but remaining in a customs union would be precisely that. But could my right hon. Friend tell us: in such a situation, whether temporary or permanent, who looks after trade remedies and trade defences of key UK industries such as steel and ceramics? Who sets the tariff policy for the developing world, which at the moment we have through the EU but would like to do on our own? Who is responsible for trade remedies and trade preferences?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, my right hon. Friend, as a former Trade Minister—a position he held with distinction—understands these issues and their intricacies. Of course, in a customs union, trade policy—with all the issues like trade remedies and trade sanctions—will be a matter for the European Union and not the UK. I believe that we should be making those decisions for ourselves here in the UK.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree with me and many, many people in Northern Ireland about the remarks of Taoiseach Varadkar at a dinner—at which I understand the Prime Minister was not present—when showing photographs of a terrible atrocity on the border and implying that that was somehow what would happen if there was a hard border? The EU does not want a hard border and will not put one up. We will not put one up. The Republic of Ireland will not be putting one up. Who is going to put this hard border up?

The Prime Minister: We are obviously committed to no hard border, and we have made it clear that in any circumstances, including in a no-deal situation, we would be doing all that we could to ensure that there was no hard border. We would look to work with Ireland and the European Union to ensure that there was no hard border, but there has been no commitment in relation to that.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Given how tantalisingly close we are to a deal, if time were to run out, has the Prime Minister considered, rather than having a general election or a second referendum, the use of applying to extend article 50, even if it is for a limited period, so that she can kick the ball over the line?

The Prime Minister: We have said right from the beginning that we would not be looking to extend article 50. This refers back to an earlier question from one of our right hon. Friends about people actually wanting to see that we are leaving the European Union. I think we owe it to people to deliver on this. What we want now is to have the decisions that finalise the negotiations to ensure that we get that good deal.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Would it not be more honest for the Prime Minister, rather than spinning that this is 95% done—I understand why she wants to do that—to explain that, actually, the divorce terms are merely the clearing of the throat before a five-year, or perhaps a seven-year, legal treaty arrangement on our future trading relationship? Would that not be a more honest representation? If people want to end it soon, give the people a final say so that they can decide what to do.

The Prime Minister: No, the reference to the 95% is a factual description of where we are in relation to the withdrawal agreement. Neither side in this negotiation wants to be negotiating for the period of time that the hon. Gentleman has suggested, which is why both sides will be working to ensure that we have that future relationship agreed by December 2020. I suggest that if he looks at the average time that it takes to conduct trade deals, he will see that many trade deals are done in precisely the sort of time that we are talking about.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I join those who have condemned the excessive and violent language that has been used and hold up my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister as a role model, as she is always courteous, even to those who disagree with her on this important matter. Coming to the substance of it, when the implementation period was announced, it was going to be the implementation of what had been agreed. It now seems to be a period for further negotiation, not being sure of where we are going. Does the Prime Minister know where we are going?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the comments that he made about the remarks and language that were used at the weekend.

Yes, we do—we have set out our plan and we are negotiating on the basis of that plan with the European Union. As I say, significant elements of the structure and scope of the future relationship have been agreed. The legal position, as I am sure my hon. Friend knows very well, is that we cannot sign up to legal text in relation to that future relationship until we have left the European Union. I have also said all along that when
Parliament looks at the withdrawal agreement, it will also want to have sufficient detail about the future relationship and know what that will be. That is what we are working to deliver.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister clarify whether 95% of a withdrawal deal has been agreed with the EU? If it has, why has this House no details of it?

The Prime Minister: I will explain the negotiating process: we sit down and talk about the issues; we get to the point of having a text on the table; that text is looked at by leaders, and they take a decision on the text and the future relationship—that is the point at which the negotiations and the deal are completed; and then this House will be able to see all the details of the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship in deciding whether to accept the deal the Government have negotiated.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that the EU never makes its final concessions until just before any given deadline, what could possibly be gained in 24 months that could not be gained in 21?

The Prime Minister: The purpose of the backstop is to cover the circumstances in which the future relationship cannot be put in place by 1 January 2021. One example might be if it has not been fully ratified by all the Parliaments in the EU that need to ratify it—the process is going through but has not been completed by the end of December 2020. That is why the backstop is in the withdrawal agreement. It is an insurance policy for that period.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister outline what comprises the 5% that is still to be negotiated?

The Prime Minister: The backstop.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Before entering Parliament, I spent 27 years as a commercial negotiator, but there is no blueprint for this negotiation. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that she will continue to negotiate the best deal for our country and not be knocked off course by the continuous speculation from the sidelines?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union set out the position in relation to the procedures of this House in response to questions following the urgent question earlier, but I can absolutely guarantee to my hon. Friend that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As the Prime Minister said in answer to an earlier question, the House will be voting not on legal certainty about the future relationship—as she keeps saying to Opposition Members—but on a political assertion. We are being asked to vote on uncertainty. Isn’t that right?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not right. It has been clear from the very beginning that it is not possible for the legal treaty, free trade agreement and other aspects to be signed until we are outside the European Union. However, I have also said that we need to ensure that when Members come to vote on the overall package—the withdrawal agreement and the outline of the future relationship—they have sufficient detail to have confidence in the nature of the future relationship. An important aspect is the link that there will be between the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship, because, as the EU itself has said, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that when we leave the common fisheries policy in December 2020, she will not allow our fishing resources to be included in any future trade deal?

The Prime Minister: I am absolutely clear that when we leave the common fisheries policy, we will become an independent coastal state. We will have to sit around the table with others, and negotiate with others, as an independent coastal state, but we will be doing that on our own, for our own purposes. Of course, if the
Scottish National party had its way, Scotland would stay in the common fisheries policy, which would be bad for Scottish fishermen.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): This morning I attended a meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Parties from across these islands expressed a great deal of concern about the state of the negotiations and the impact on our economy, peace and stability. The Irish Government made it very clear that putting a time limit on the backstop would rather defeat the objective, and that it must be legally certain. Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, the purpose of the backstop that we are negotiating is to ensure that if there is a period between the end of the implementation period and the future relationship coming into operation, we can still guarantee no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The best solution to the issue of no hard border—and this has been said publicly by the Taoiseach as well—will be achieved through that future relationship. That is why it is important for us to work on ensuring that the future relationship will be in place for 1 January 2021.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Earlier today, I met a number of business people in my constituency. From the large businesses to the small, the message was “For God’s sake, help her to get a deal over the line.” It may not be perfect—it may not be everything that we want—but a deal we must have. As the pro-business leader of a pro-business party, will my right hon. Friend ensure that she delivers that, and does so without any dogma to get in the way of it?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is exactly what we are doing. We are working for that deal—a deal that is good for business and good for people.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): May I say to the Prime Minister that I found the comments made about her by some of her own MPs at the weekend not only deeply offensive, but deeply misogynistic?

A No. 10 spokesman said recently that “there can be no withdrawal agreement without a precise future framework” on trade. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that the political declaration will deliver frictionless trade with our largest trading partner—or will we be asked to vote on a blind Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments about the language that was used at the weekend.

What we will seek to do is bring to the House a deal that incorporates the withdrawal agreement, but, alongside that, sufficient detail about the future relationship so that everyone is able to see what the future relationship will be. That will cover more than trade, but trade will of course be a key element of it.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please confirm that UK fishermen will not be subjected to an additional 12 months in the common fisheries policy, with the crumbs that Europe throws to us, during any extended implementation period?

The Prime Minister: The interests of fishermen throughout the United Kingdom, and their concern to be out of the common fisheries policy, is one of the key issues that are at the forefront of our thinking as we look at the different options that are being put forward. I also recognise that the timing of negotiations on fishing has a particular impact here. Access to waters for 2021 will be determined in December 2020, and that is an aspect that we have already taken into account in our negotiations with the European Union.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister commit herself to guaranteeing unilaterally the rights of the EU citizens who have chosen to make their lives here, in the event of her being unable to strike a deal with the EU?

The Prime Minister: Yes. In the statement I made after Salzburg I made it clear that in a no deal situation we will guarantee the rights of EU citizens.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend has my full support in dealing with these complex issues through the prism of the national interest. She will know that when we joined the European Economic Community all those years ago, we did so on a cross-party basis comprising women and men of good will. Should we not now seek to replicate that, to deliver a people’s parliamentary Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. When it comes to Members across the House voting on the deal that we bring back from the European Union, I hope that all Members will recognise the importance of delivering on the vote of the British people and delivering a deal that will be good for the UK.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): In 2017 the Prime Minister went to the country to get a blank cheque for her approach to negotiating a deal for the UK, and the country said, “No, thank you.” Rather than hectoring the Leader of the Opposition, why does she not reach out, in the spirit of national unity, to try to get a deal in the interests of the country?

The Prime Minister: We are working to get a deal in the interests of the country. As I recall, at last year’s general election 80% of Members of Parliament were elected on the basis that they would deliver on the referendum.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This morning I received a text message from Steven North, a leading councillor in my constituency and a stalwart of the Conservative party who has been delivering leaflets and knocking on doors for more than 20 years. His text read:

“How can we drag a bad deal on for a year, so that it is watered down even more? Better off sticking to the date, be firm and have no deal”.

Prime Minister, I agree with Steve. Do you?
The Prime Minister: Let me first thank Steve for all the work he has done for the party over many years—as a former councillor. I know how hard councillors work to represent their local communities. One of the problems is that there is an assumption that we are suddenly saying that we have signed up to extending an implementation period by a year; we have not done so. What we are saying is that we need to ensure that we have a backstop in the withdrawal agreement. On the proposal we put forward on a UK-EU-wide customs territory, there has been a substantial shift from the EU. We are now working with the EU on that proposal. The other proposal that has emerged is for us to have the option, as an alternative, of choosing to extend the implementation period for a short period of time, were that to be necessary. I want to work to make sure that neither of those is necessary.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that we have apparently made 95% progress on the withdrawal deal, what percentage progress have we made on the substantive deal? Given the answer that the Prime Minister has already given today, what percentage progress does she now think would be sufficient for the House to vote on the deal: 95%, 100%, 60% or 40%? Does she agree that we seem to be putting our finger in the wind on this one?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not agree. As I have said, we will bring forward detail on the future relationship alongside the withdrawal agreement so that the House knows what the future relationship will be.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): The Prime Minister understandably repeated that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. May I ask her equally to repeat tirelessly that it is her decision, and this Conservative Government, that will guarantee the rights of EU nationals, deal or no deal?

The Prime Minister: I know that this is an issue that my hon. Friend has campaigned on in particular. I am very happy to reassure him that it is this Conservative Government who will guarantee the rights of EU citizens, deal or no deal.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On the question of a second referendum, given where we are now, and given the promises that were made by the Leave campaign, does it not bother the Prime Minister at all that many of those who voted to leave in 2016 did so on a false prospectus?

The Prime Minister: The referendum was held and there were lively and passionate campaigns on both sides of the argument. We gave the people the decision. The people took their decision. We should now deliver on it.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that delivering on the referendum is a matter of trust and honour, and that some of her backstop delays could erode that trust? Worse, it plays into the hands of the EU, whose tactics are delay and duplicity.

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because I am aware of people’s concerns about the possibility of an attempt in some circumstances to keep us in some permanent limbo that we are looking at mechanisms to ensure that a backstop, if it is needed, is there for only a limited period of time to provide that bridge to the future relationship, and ideally it would not have to be used at all.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has told us that parts of the political declaration on the future relationship have been agreed, including on services. What has been agreed on financial services?

The Prime Minister: We have indeed made good progress, as I have said, on transport, services and other elements of the economic partnership, and on the security partnership. We are still in the process of negotiating those details so that we can bring them to the House at the point of final agreement.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): If the transition period is made longer, my understanding is that it will take us into the next EU budget period. If that happens, how much would we need to pay in? Given that we would already have left the EU, how much say would we have over what we pay in?

The Prime Minister: First, as I have made clear, I do not want, intend or expect us to have to go into a further budget period. However, were it the case that a gap appeared between December 2020 and the full start of the future relationship, I am looking at a proposal that would give the UK a choice on which of the backstop options we took forward. Obviously it would be necessary to look at the precise arrangements that would apply in both circumstances so that a clear choice could be made.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I think that the language that was directed at the Prime Minister over the weekend was absolutely disgraceful. There is real concern that the meaningful vote that this House was promised will actually become a meaningless vote. Why will MEPs have a greater say in the UK’s final deal than MPs in this House?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I said earlier: what we are looking at is an amendable vote. If members of the public are told, “Parliament is going to vote on the deal that the Government bring back from the European Union,” I think that they would expect Parliament to be able to vote on the deal that the Government bring back.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Many businesses are continuing to invest, including Meggitt, with its £130 million supersite in my constituency, but a lack of certainty in the negotiations is causing many projects to be put on hold. What reassurances can the Prime Minister offer to encourage businesses to continue to invest and provide jobs for the future?

The Prime Minister: I fully recognise that we are continuing to see investment decisions being made and jobs created by businesses in this country, as we saw in the excellent employment figures last week. We want to bring about that certainty as quickly as we can, which is why we are working to ensure that we can end the negotiations and present the deal so that businesses know where they stand for the future.
David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): There have been several hundred extradition agreements between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in recent years. What progress has the Prime Minister made on securing the European arrest warrant for future use after March?

The Prime Minister: I am well aware of the impact that the European arrest warrant had on the ability to extradite between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which is one of the reasons—there are others—why we have been working with the European Union, and made good progress, on that and other aspects of internal security.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): At the European Council meeting there were many discussions on continuing security co-operation? As we saw with the Salisbury incident, it is vital that we continue to work with our allies, regardless of the fact that we are leaving the EU.

The Prime Minister: There was a wider discussion on the importance of continuing to work together on key security issues. Of course, the details of the future relationship on internal security, such as those relating to the European arrest warrant, are being looked at in the negotiations, but there was a very clear sense around the table of the importance of us all continuing to work together on key security issues.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The backstop is an insurance policy. Can the Prime Minister give us an example of any insurance policy she has ever seen or signed up to that was based on an expiry date?

The Prime Minister: I do not know what insurance policies the hon. Gentleman takes out, but most insurance policies have a renewal date.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I have met a great many businesses in Taunton Deane, particularly in the last week, and there is overwhelming support among them for the Prime Minister, but they all agree that they want a clear plan as soon as possible and that they do not want a permanent backstop. Can she assure me that she will press on with her endeavours and never agree to a permanent backstop?

The Prime Minister: Like the businesses that my hon. Friend refers to, I do not want a permanent backstop either. I want to ensure that we can move to the future relationship, and I do not want the backstop to have to be used at all.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Scottish Conservative MPs threaten to resign, then they threaten not to resign. They threaten to bring down the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal, then they said that they might not do so. Is she absolutely certain that she has the full support of her hon. Friends from Scotland?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I also welcome the significant contribution that my hon. Friends from Scotland are making to our debates in standing up for Scotland in this Chamber.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was negotiating the handover of Hong Kong, the final agreement did not see all her starting goals realised, but she did sign a settlement that all sides could live with and that allowed Hong Kong to flourish thereafter. Will my right hon. Friend draw courage from that precedent and ignore some of the outrageous things in the media about her and the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: Any negotiation is about two sides coming together and reaching an agreement that they can both sign up to. Does that mean that both sides get 100% of what they started off wanting? Actually, no, by the very nature of the negotiation. What is important is that we get a good deal out of this and that we work hard to get the sort of deal that we think is in the interests of this country.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I often disagree with the Prime Minister on matters of policy, but I stand in full solidarity with her against the dreadful language that was used and the threats that were made at the weekend. We have only about five months to go until the end of March, so how does she think we should work to eradicate that sort of language and those sorts of threats, particularly towards female MPs, given that we in this House are supposed to set an example?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and as I have said, I am also grateful for the comments of other hon. Members who have shared similar sentiments in their interventions. It is incumbent on all of us to be careful about the language that we use in public, and comments such as the ones she and others have made today are part of encouraging the recognition of the importance of being careful and of carefully considering the impact of the language we use.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that she does not want to extend the transition period. Will she make it clear to the EU that if the transition period is extended, we are not going to pay any more money?

The Prime Minister: I have made it very clear that I want both sides to work towards having the future relationship in place by the end of December 2020, and there is a commitment to that. If we do have to bridge, and if we have to make a choice between backstop options—assuming that these two options are available—we would of course have to look at the arrangements for that. We would be negotiating in relation to those arrangements, but we want to ensure that we get a good deal done in time to ensure that the backstop arrangement, whichever it is, does not have to be used.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The NHS and the supermarkets are now stockpiling goods, and the cost of storage is increasing. Will the Government open a compensation scheme in relation to those costs, or will they be passed down to consumers?

The Prime Minister: Commercial bodies will obviously make their own decisions about the arrangements that they have to make, and the last time I looked, the NHS was part of the Government.
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I utterly condemn the violent misogynistic language that has been used, whether it be threats of stabbing from voices on my own Benches or threats of lynching from voices opposite. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the United Kingdom Government would never demand that a European Union member state carve off a part of itself as part of any agreement? Does she also agree that it is therefore completely unacceptable to suggest that Northern Ireland should be carved off from the rest of the United Kingdom as we go through this negotiation?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would not require any other EU member state to do that, and it is unacceptable for the EU to require us effectively to carve Northern Ireland away from the United Kingdom with a customs border down the Irish sea. I have made that very clear, and that is why we are looking for alternative backstop proposals.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): A huge number of people marching for a democratic say on the next steps and a fresh assessment of the will of the people should not be ignored by any Government, unless the Government are perhaps not being completely full with us about what they know. Does the Prime Minister think that her deal will leave us better off than the deal we already have as an EU member—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that we are working for a good deal. Our best days lie ahead of us, but this is about getting a good deal, getting good deals around the rest of the world and ensuring that we build a better and brighter future for the people of this country.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s comments about the progress being made on security co-operation at the European Council. Notwithstanding the big issues that still face her in the negotiations, does she agree that the security relationship is critical, particularly in relation to combating cyber-attacks across international boundaries?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, particularly in relation to cyber-attacks and to our continuing to work with the European Union on these issues. Concern about cyber-attacks was one of the reasons that the Dutch Prime Minister and I were keen to press the EU to move ahead on this work, to ensure that we can take measures, potentially including sanctions, in relation to this. We will continue to work with them on that.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Prime Minister has completely and utterly dismissed the 770,000 people who marched in London on Saturday and the many hundreds of thousands who would have marched if they had been able to be in London. She is going to fix the vote in this House on her withdrawal deal. What message does that send to the many millions of people who are demanding a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I think that I have answered this question, and I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers that I gave earlier.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Negotiating a good deal is hard; anyone who has negotiated anything will know that it is hard to get a good deal and none of us has tried to negotiate anything like this. May I urge my right hon. Friend to continue to hold her nerve and not to capitulate, as some would have her do? I urge her to hold her nerve and negotiate the best possible deal for my constituents and our country.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. This is the time when we need to hold our nerve as we come to the end of these negotiations, to get that good deal.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister tell us what practical steps she has taken to build consensus across the parties and across the nation on how this country should move ahead?

The Prime Minister: We are ensuring that everything we are doing is done on the basis of the national interest. That is what this Government have put first and foremost, and we will continue to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend to pay no heed to the vile comments in Sunday’s papers, but instead to remain focused on the prize of delivering frictionless trade between Northern Ireland and Ireland, between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and between the UK and the rest of the EU, because so many jobs and livelihoods depend on getting that right.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I can give her the assurance that we are absolutely focused on getting that good deal and that good trading relationship that will protect jobs here in the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When we entered the common market in 1973, the fishing sector had its rights denied and its fishing waters reduced. Can the Prime Minister confirm that we will take back our coastal waters when we leave the EU on 29 March and that our fishing sector will experience the boom years that are yet to come?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, we fully recognise the concerns about the way in which the fishing industry was treated in the negotiations when we entered the European Economic Community back in the 1970s. I am clear that we will become an independent coastal state and that we will be able to take back that control. We will be able to make those decisions and negotiate on our own behalf on those issues, rather than being done by the European Union. Also, we want to see how we can enhance our fishing industry around the United Kingdom in the future.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that an extension to the implementation period was undesirable. I urge her to use far stronger language when it comes to the common fisheries policy and confirm that we will no longer remain tied to the CFP beyond December 2020.

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, the interests of fishermen across the whole United Kingdom are among those at the forefront of our thinking as we look at all
the arrangements and proposals. As I have said, I recognise that there are timetabling issues in relation to our ability to negotiate as an independent coastal state once we leave the European Union. I assure my hon. Friend that we will put those concerns at the forefront of our thinking.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I welcome the comments in the Prime Minister's statement condemning the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. However, in answer to a parliamentary question from me following the murder, the British Government confirmed that they would still send high-ranking diplomats to the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh this week, despite all the spin about removing the Secretary of State for International Trade from the delegation. Following further revelations over the weekend, rather than empty gestures and words, is not a full boycott more appropriate and a strategic rethink of our relations with Saudi Arabia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will have heard at the beginning of my statement of my deep concern about what happened to Jamal Khashoggi and what has been revealed. We need to ensure that we get absolutely to the truth of what happened. The original proposal was that Secretary of State would attend that event, and we have been very clear: it was right that we decided that there would be no ministerial attendance.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The west midlands and the town of Redditch are creating new businesses at a record rate due to our innovative and creative entrepreneurs. Will the Prime Minister confirm to the House that she continues to strain every sinew to ensure their future prosperity?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am happy to give that reassurance to my hon. Friend. Not only in relation to our negotiations with the European Union, but in relation to our modern industrial strategy, we are ensuring that we are a great place or one of the best places in the world to set up and grow a business.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that a meaningful vote is meaningful only if votes on amendments come before the vote on the principle of the deal? If that does not happen, she will be sent home to think again by this Parliament. If she loses that meaningful vote, will she accept that she has lost the confidence of the House?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that the vote will be an amendable vote. Obviously, the Procedure Committee—[Interruption.] Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to listen to the answer. The Procedure Committee is considering the nature of the vote, but, as I have said to a number of Opposition Members, if he asked members of the public, they would say that they expect Parliament to vote on the deal the Government bring back.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On Thursday, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said from the Dispatch Box that he was invincibly confident that we would be an independent coastal state by December 2020. Does the Prime Minister share his confidence and will she make the same commitment?

The Prime Minister: I am confident because I am confident that we can negotiate our future relationship such that it comes into place on 1 January 2021.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It was disturbing to see the vile language towards the Prime Minister regarding EU negotiations. It affects not only the individual but their whole family. It was particularly sobering because, only a week ago, an individual was charged in relation to abusing me. People watch how we treat each other in the House and we have to act as role models. Does the Prime Minister agree that, as elected Members, we must take a raincheck and never perpetuate abuse in politics?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady has been subject to abuse that has led, as I understand from her question, to somebody being charged or to action being taken against an individual. If we are to have good, healthy debate in this country on matters of policy and politics—there will be strong disagreements and strong views held—it is very important that we conduct our discussions in a way that does not lead to abuse. We need to conduct discussions in a respectful manner.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Prime Minister has been clear today that a second referendum is not on the table because we must respect the views of the 17.5 million who voted to leave, but is there another reason why it is inappropriate to have another referendum with remain on the agenda: it would prejudice our negotiations by creating an incentive for the European Union to give us an extremely bad deal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right not only that we owe it to the 17.4 million people who voted to leave the European Union, but that it needs to be very clear to the European Union that we will be leaving and that there is no question of that second referendum. That was why I was surprised that the shadow Foreign Secretary has said today that, if there were a second referendum under Labour’s proposal, remain could be on the ballot. That is going back on the vote that people gave in 2016.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On the security aspect of the Prime Minister’s statement, did the EU Council discuss the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty—the INF treaty—which America is expected to announce this week that it is going to leave? That will not help to bring Russia back into compliance and will be dangerous for us all. Does she have a strategy to ensure that that does not happen?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asks whether that was discussed at the European Union Council. It was not, but a number of other security matters were. We continue to believe that it is important for that treaty to continue, but the parties to it must abide by it.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Should not the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have the opportunity to give their consent to any deal she brings back—this should also happen in the event of no deal—that makes any change to the Irish border as set out in the Good Friday agreement?
The Prime Minister: We are very well aware of the obligations and commitments we have as a result of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We are working to ensure that we maintain all of them because we recognise the importance of the agreement.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Electoral Commission has ruled that the leave campaign broke electoral law with regard to spending limits. Does the Prime Minister believe that that in any way undermines the result of the referendum? If she does not, can she explain what is the point of electoral law?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the matter to which the hon. Lady refers is subject to judicial proceedings. We gave the people a vote. The people made their choice and we are delivering on that choice.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister told the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) that, if the meaningful vote does not succeed in this House, she intends to carry on as Prime Minister until 29 March next year and deliver a no deal Brexit. Is that really her position?

The Prime Minister: I told my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019, and we will.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The status of British-Irish citizens in Northern Ireland is protected under the Good Friday agreement, which means that, if they wish, they can legally renounce their British citizenship and receive no detriment to their social or democratic rights. Will the Prime Minister therefore state unequivocally that people born in Northern Ireland will continue after Brexit to be able to be solely Irish and to identify as Irish and therefore as EU citizens?

The Prime Minister: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that if he looks at the joint report that we agreed with the European Union last December, he will see that that matter was covered and that we are guaranteeing the continuing rights of those citizens.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): No one in the Labour Party underestimates how difficult the Prime Minister’s job will be when she sits at the negotiating table with her MPs trying to hammer out a deal. If she is so confident of her position and of her public support, and given her failure to build consensus and compromise in the House, instead of losing a politicians’ vote on her deal, as is now likely, why will she not put her deal to the final deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will recognise the geographical position of Gibraltar is a particular issue, and obviously arrangements have been put in place over a number of years with Spain. That situation is different from that of Scotland, which of course, as part of the United Kingdom, will be leaving the European Union. Gibraltar will be leaving alongside the United Kingdom and we will ensure that the arrangements are in place to protect its economy.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Prime Minister has estimated that there needs to be a six-week stockpile of food and medicine. What about manufacturing companies, such as Ford in my constituency, and the small and medium-sized enterprises that provide components? What if they cannot stockpile for six weeks? Will there be compensation for industry and for those employees who may be laid off because of chaos at our ports?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will have seen the various arrangements that are being put in place, which are mentioned in the technical notices that we have issued. We are making preparations for no deal, because we have not come to the conclusion of these negotiations. I believe that coming to a good deal is the best outcome for the United Kingdom, and I think the European Union side recognises the importance of coming to a good deal with the United Kingdom. A good deal for us will be a good deal for them.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Prime Minister says that negotiations with the EU are 95% settled. The Select Committee on Scottish Affairs has been taking evidence on trade, and witness after witness has made it clear how vital protected geographical indications are to Scotland’s interests. What assurances can she now give us that such protections for the unique products of Scotland and the UK will remain as strong as they are now?

The Prime Minister: Geographical indications are one of the issues we have spent considerable time considering with the European Union, because we recognise their importance. The hon. Lady says I said that 95% of everything is agreed, but 95% of the withdrawal agreement has been agreed.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Some 1.5 million young people have not had their chance to have a say on Brexit, yet they are eligible to vote. On the biggest issue facing us since the second world war, why deny them the chance to vote on this crucial issue for their future?
**The Prime Minister:** If we followed the position that everybody, in any year, who becomes eligible to vote should be able to vote on this issue, we would end up with a never-ending set of votes on Brexit, rather than doing what the British people want, which is to leave the European Union and to do it on good terms.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Prime Minister has on many occasions referred to the result of the 2016 referendum. Does she accept that, in a democracy, people have the right to change their mind?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course people sometimes change their mind, but the Government were very clear at the time, and it was not just the Government. In the vote in Parliament, the overwhelming majority of Members of this House agreed that there should be a referendum and that the choice should be given to the British people. [HON. MEMBERS: “Not us.”] So the SNP did not think that the British people should be able to decide their future?

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): If nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, is it possible that a successful amendment to the meaningful vote could send the Prime Minister back to renegotiate?

**The Prime Minister:** We are talking about coming to an endpoint in the negotiations, agreeing a withdrawal agreement and the future relationship, and then bringing that agreed deal back for this House to vote on.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister is keen to avoid a permanent customs union and single market arrangement, despite some Brexiteers promising the exact same benefits. If she is unable to achieve the exact same benefits, is it time to let the people take back control either through a general election or a third referendum—after 1975 and 2016—on this issue?

**The Prime Minister:** No.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister must know that, if she continues to hold herself to ransom on the whim of the minority of Members of this House who subscribe to either the ERG or the DUP, it will be a choice between a rotten deal and no deal. When will she see sense and seek to find consensus among the 600 Members who are not members of either of those two damaging splinter groups?

**The Prime Minister:** I hope we will find consensus among the 650 Members of this House when we bring a good deal back to vote on.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): If we have to accept a backstop, who will set the timescale for that backstop? The Prime Minister of the Irish Republic says that they will use the veto to ensure it is a never-ending backstop. Northern Ireland would then never have the benefit of leaving the EU.

**The Prime Minister:** The best way of ensuring no hard border is through the future relationship. The backstop we are looking at in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol to the withdrawal agreement is to cover any gap between the end of the implementation period and the coming into force of that future relationship. I want to ensure that the future relationship is there at the end of the implementation period so there is no question of a backstop. I am also clear that there can be no question of us finding ourselves left in that backstop in permanent limbo and unable to put that future relationship in place. That is exactly what we have been clear about in the negotiations.
Death of Jamal Khashoggi

6.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the death of Jamal Khashoggi.

From the moment that Jamal Khashoggi was reported missing after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October, extremely disturbing reports emerged about his fate. On Friday, we received confirmation that Mr Khashoggi had indeed suffered a violent death, and the Saudi Foreign Minister has since described it as murder.

The Government condemn Mr Khashoggi’s killing in the strongest possible terms. Today the thoughts and prayers of the whole House are with his fiancée, his family and his friends, who were left to worry for more than two weeks only to have their worst fears confirmed. After his disappearance, the Government made it clear that Saudi Arabia must co-operate with Turkey and conduct a full and credible investigation. Anyone found responsible for any offence must be held fully accountable.

On top of our concerns about the appalling brutality involved lie two other points. First, Mr Khashoggi’s horrific treatment was inflicted by people who work for a Government with whom we have close relations. And secondly, as well as being a critic of the Saudi Government, he was a journalist. At the time of his death, Mr Khashoggi wrote for The Washington Post and had contributed to The Guardian. Because in this country we believe in freedom of expression and a free media, the protection of journalists who are simply doing their job is of paramount concern. On 9 October, I conveyed this message to the Saudi ambassador in person and to the Saudi Foreign Minister by telephone. I instructed the British ambassador in Riyadh to emphasise our strength of feeling to the Saudi Government at every level. Last week, my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary cancelled his attendance at a forthcoming conference in Riyadh. On 17 October, I met Fred Ryan, the chief executive of The Washington Post, and I spoke again to the Saudi Foreign Minister this weekend.

On Friday, the Saudi Government released the preliminary findings of their investigation. They later announced the arrest of 18 people and the sacking of two senior officials, which is an important start to the process of accountability. But I will say frankly to this House that the claim that Mr Khashoggi died in a fight does not amount to a credible explanation. There remains an urgent need to establish exactly what happened on 2 October and thereafter.

The incident happened on Turkish soil, so it is right that the investigation is being led by the Government of Turkey. They now need to establish who authorised the dispatch of 15 officials from Saudi Arabia to Turkey; when the Government in Riyadh first learned of Mr Khashoggi’s death; what became of the body; why there was a delay in allowing Turkish investigators to enter the consulate; and why it took until 19 October to disclose that Mr Khashoggi had died 17 days earlier. These are critical questions, and it will be possible to apportion responsibility and ensure that any crimes are punished following proper due process.

Last week, I spoke to both my French and German counterparts, and the House will have noticed the strong statement jointly released yesterday by Britain, France and Germany. The actions Britain and our allies take will depend on two things: first, the credibility of the final explanation given by Saudi Arabia; and, secondly, our confidence that such an appalling episode cannot and will not be repeated. We will, of course, wait for the final outcome of the investigation before making any decisions.

Hon. Members know that we have an important strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, involving defence and security co-operation, which has saved lives on the streets of Britain. We also have a trading partnership that supports thousands of jobs. Although we will therefore be thoughtful and considered in our response, I have also been clear that, if the appalling stories we are reading turn out to be true, they are fundamentally incompatible with our values and we will act accordingly.

Indeed such reports are also incompatible with Saudi Arabia’s own stated goal of progress and renewal. That is why the extent to which Saudi Arabia is able to convince us that it remains committed to that progress and to ultimately determining the responsibility of the Lekhwiya and its allies, and we will continue to convey our strength of feeling on this issue to every level of the Saudi leadership.

In his final column, published in The Washington Post after his death, Jamal Khashoggi lamented the lack of freedom of expression in the Arab world. Let us make sure that the lessons learned and actions taken following his death at least progress and honour his life’s work. I commend this statement to the House.

6.33 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): First, may I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement and join him in sending condolences to Mr Khashoggi’s family and his fiancée, Hatice, a lady who waited in anguish outside the consulate for 11 hours while the Saudi butchers went about their barbaric work? She wrote this weekend:

“They took your bodily presence from my world. But your beautiful laugh will remain in my soul forever.”

The worst aspect of this disgraceful murder is that none of us has been remotely surprised about it. For the past three years, my party has warned about the actions of Mohammed bin Salman, first as the architect of Saudi policy on Yemen and then since his elevation to Crown Prince—doubling the rate of executions in his first eight months; kidnapping and beating up the Prime Minister of Lebanon and forcing him to resign; and jailing women’s rights activists and threatening to behead them. All those things have shown a man with no respect for the rule of law, no respect for international boundaries and no tolerance for dissent, all of which spelt the end for Jamal Khashoggi.

Of course, we have seen the Crown Prince’s true face most vividly in his continuing campaign in Yemen: a strategy of blockade and bombardment that has killed thousands of civilians in airstrikes and put millions of children on the brink of starvation. When we look back at his air campaign, with the bombings of weddings, homes and hospitals, it is a sad reminder that the repeated pattern played out. When major civilian casualties are reported, first they deny the reports are true; then they deny responsibility; and when the proof becomes
incontrovertible, they say it is all a terrible mistake, they blame rogue elements, promise those will be punished and say it will not happen again—until the next time, when it does. This is exactly the same pattern we have seen here, which speaks of a Crown Prince who takes his allies for fools and relies on the fact that his lies will be believed, he will be exonerated and everyone will return to business as usual once the publicity has subsided—well, not this time. Enough! It must not happen again.

The Government must wake up to the reality of who the Crown Prince is. It is just seven months since the Prime Minister rolled out the red carpet for him at Chequers, fawned all over him and hailed him as a great reformer. How utterly foolish she looks now, as some of us predicted she would do. The new Foreign Secretary has the chance to be different. He has just said, as he did on Friday morning, that if these stories are true there will be consequences for Britain’s relationship with Riyadh. But I ask him: how much more confirmation does he need? It is time to move on from asking what happened in Istanbul and who gave the orders—we all know the answers. The question is: what will the consequences be of what he promised be?

I ask the Foreign Secretary to consider three immediate steps. First, will he use the new Magnitsky powers included in the sanctions Bill to apply financial penalties on all individuals, up to and including the Crown Prince himself, who ordered and carried out this murder? Secondly, will the Foreign Secretary accept that UK arms sales for use in Yemen must be suspended pending a comprehensive, UN-led investigation into all alleged war crimes? Thirdly, more than two years on since the UK presented its draft resolution to the UN demanding a ceasefire in Yemen, will he finally ignore the informal Saudi veto hanging over that resolution and at last submit it to the Security Council? Those are three ways to show Saudi Arabia that there are consequences for its actions, three ways to end its impunity and persuade it to show Saudi Arabia that there are consequences for its veto hanging over that resolution and at last submit it to the Security Council? Those are three ways to show Saudi Arabia that there are consequences for its actions, three ways to end its impunity and persuade it to show its hand. And I repeat: those are three ways to end its impunity and persuade its allies to face the consequences and of course it will have an impact on the relationship with Saudi Arabia.

With respect to the other two points that the right hon. Lady mentioned, the situation in Yemen is heartbreaking. There is a humanitarian crisis at the moment—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op):

There’s a war going on.

Mr Hunt: Indeed there is. I spoke to David Miliband about this when I was in New York for the UN General Assembly—perhaps that name is not supposed to be mentioned any more on the other side of the House. I urge the right hon. Lady to recognise that the faults in the crisis in Yemen go both ways. Saudi has made terrible mistakes, but missiles are also being fired from Yemen into Saudi—in fact, seven missiles have been fired at Riyadh—and the Saudi coalition is acting under the authority of UN resolution 2216.

Owing to our relationship with Saudi, we are able to press them hard to embrace a political solution, and that is what I did when I met the Saudi Foreign Minister on 27 September. I spoke to him about this on 16 August. I also met the Emirati Foreign Minister on 6 and 27 September to make that point. We are able to have that influence precisely because we have a relationship, but if we took the actions that the right hon. Lady suggests, our influence with Saudi and Emirates would be precisely zero, and the humanitarian crisis would most likely last longer.

The right hon. Lady talked about arms sales. The procedures we follow in this country, as she well knows, are among the strictest in the world. They were introduced by the late Robin Cook in 2000 and strengthened under the Conservative-led coalition in 2014. Far from selling arms left, right and centre, we do not sell to a number of friendly Governments such as Lebanon, Libya and Iraq. In July 2017, the High Court ruled that our sales to Saudi Arabia were compliant with those regulations, but we keep the situation constantly under review, and that will include any implications that arise from the results of the Kashoggi investigation.

We are consistent in our championing of human rights across the world, but when I wanted to take action against Russia for the first ever chemical weapons attack on British soil, I was told by the Leader of the Opposition not to take action—action that was later supported by our European friends—but to return to dialogue. The difference between this side of the House and EU structures. In fact, we have already had discussions about whether we should extend our sanctions regime to individuals responsible for human rights violations, which would allow precisely that to happen. But all these actions are far more effective when they are taken in concert with our European and American allies. Those are the discussions we are all having, but what we are all saying is that it would be wrong to make any decisions until we actually know what has happened. We have heard all sorts of media reports about these recordings, but to my knowledge none of us have actually seen transcripts or heard these recordings. The Turks say that all this stuff is going to be published. We do need to wait until we can see clearly the hard evidence as to what has happened. As I have made very clear this afternoon, if they turn out to be true there will be consequences and of course it will have an impact on the relationship with Saudi Arabia.
and that side is not what we believe in, it is how we get there. It is our belief that British influence depends on British strength.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am sure the whole House joins in expressing our sympathy to the Kashoggi family and his fiancée. Can I ask my right hon. Friend to talk a little about the situation we are in with Saudi Arabia? We have gone from having something that was far from a democracy, but was at least a consultative monarchy, to what is in many ways a unipolar autocracy under the Crown Prince. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is part of a pattern of instability into the Saudi regime is one that we should all be concerned about, but no one more than King Salman himself, who has allowed this instability in his kingdom, his rule and his house?

Although this vile murder stands alone for its horror, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is part of a pattern of abuse of press freedom that we have seen against YouTubers, critics and other writers in Saudi Arabia, and that therefore we should be very clear that this is not an individual act? The United Kingdom has Arabia, and that therefore we should be very clear that against YouTube, critics and other writers in Saudi Arabia, and that therefore we should be very clear that this is not an individual act? The United Kingdom has been nothing if not a bastion for free speech and liberty of expression, and we must be firm in this instance too.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks extremely powerfully and he accurately points out the fact that autocracies are inherently less stable than countries that have democratic institutions, and there is a higher risk of appalling violations of human rights. It is fair to say that in the case of Saudi Arabia over recent years there has been a pattern of deterioration, but there have also been some conflicting signals, such as allowing women to drive and other things going in the opposite direction.

What I said clearly in my statement was that the impact in terms of consequences for our relationship with Saudi Arabia will depend on the confidence that we have that these kinds of incidents cannot and will not be repeated. Giving us confidence in the reform and renewal process, which is official Saudi policy, will be essential, and that needs to take on board many of the things my hon. Friend said.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): We on the Scottish National party Benches also send our condolences to the family of Jamal Kashoggi. Like so many others in the House, we are appalled by his murder by this—frankly—criminal act, regardless of how we look at it. We have seen acts throughout the world that show that the rules-based system is clearly under threat, and that should concern us all. We have rightly called out the Russians, so what consideration is being given to similar action against those who are found guilty of perpetrating this act? What independent investigations are taking place with the UK Government?

I welcome the remarks by the shadow Foreign Secretary and others about the use of the Magnitsky provisions, and I recognise what the Foreign Secretary has said about working with our European partners, because that will be vital. Freedom of press is critical here. It is critical when journalists are targeted in Turkey, in Saudi Arabia, in Russia or elsewhere in the world. We have to target those individuals who are found to be guilty, and the Foreign Secretary will have support from these Benches if he does so.

The Foreign Secretary remarked, on the heart-breaking scenes we have seen in Yemen, that fault goes both ways. Millions are affected by a man-made famine—a man-made disaster. He has also recognised that there is no military solution to the conflict in Yemen. If fault goes both ways and there is no military solution, why are we continuing to sell arms? Why can we sell arms to one of the perpetrators of that conflict when some of our European partners have made the decision to stop such arms sales? What is the difference between the UK and Germany, for example?

Mr Hunt: Let me take all of those points. When it comes to arms sales, we have strict guidelines in place, and we are following those guidelines. They involve an independent assessment as to whether the licences that we grant for arms sales present a clear risk of a future breach of international humanitarian law. We will keep those constantly under review. With respect to the situation in Yemen, I hope that he, like me, is proud that in the last year we have contributed £170 million to famine relief, one of the biggest contributions of any country.

With respect to the rules-based international order, I agree with the hon. Gentleman and it is a grave cause for concern that there are a growing number of breaches across the world. The rules-based order that we all want to protect has to be one that is based on values. What is shocking about the stories that we hear about what potentially happened in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul is the fact that it so clearly contravenes the values in which we all believe.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned other points about which I will happily write to him.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): It grieves me to have to say this, as a friend of the Saudis for nearly 40 years, but the Saudi explanation on this matter is completely implausible, and there can be no doubt that the order for this terrible crime came from the very top. Therefore, as good friends and allies of Saudi Arabia for many years, it behoves us to be extremely robust and candid with the Saudi Government. Yes, we have vital security and commercial interests with Saudi Arabia, and we do not wish just to blow them up. It is wrong to drop an inconvenient friend, but we in this country cannot tolerate such vile and brutal behaviour, and it cannot be allowed to pass without consequence.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend puts it characteristically powerfully, not least because of his deep understanding and knowledge of the Saudi regime. Sometimes friends have to speak very frankly to each other. All I say is that, when we have full accountability for the crimes that have been committed, which we note that the Saudi Foreign Minister himself has described as murder, that accountability must extend to the people who gave the orders for any crime that was committed and not just to the people who were there on the ground, and that is an essential part of this investigation.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Foreign Secretary to rethink the Government’s policy on Yemen. Yes, he is right that we should be
proud of our humanitarian aid, and, yes, he is right that there are appalling atrocities committed by the Iranian-backed Houthis and al-Qaeda, but we need to rethink this relationship with Saudi Arabia. I urge him to consider the proposals from the shadow Foreign Secretary today for a new UN resolution, for an independent UN inquiry and, in the meantime, for us to suspend sales of arms to Saudi Arabia that might be used in Yemen.

Mr Hunt: I do hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I do think that the situation is such that we have constantly to keep under review what is happening in Yemen. Although I have been Foreign Secretary for only three months, I can reassure him that I have been very involved in what is happening in Yemen. I have had four meetings with individuals directly involved on the ground. The truth is that this is a very, very difficult situation because, as he rightly said, there is fault on both sides. The Security Council still believes that the Martin Griffiths’ approach is the right one to unlock the problems there, but the situation is very intractable. Both sides still seem to have the view that a military solution is possible. That is not our view. Our view is that the only solution here is a political one and we need to see much faster movement towards a proper political dialogue.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House should welcome the clear and measured statement of the Foreign Secretary this afternoon. In particular, his reference to the Magnitsky provisions and to working with our allies, which the House insisted on being passed earlier this year in the face of what was a breathtaking and extraordinary act of state terrorism. Will he use this opportunity, as the new British Foreign Secretary, to review Britain’s position as a good and candid friend of Saudi Arabia and move from supporting the Saudi coalition on Yemen, which is indubitably engaged in perpetrating a famine, destroying vital infrastructure from the air and killing innocent civilians, to a position of mediation and neutrality designed to end the fighting, broker a ceasefire and secure meaningful negotiations?

Mr Hunt: I always listen very carefully to what my right hon. Friend says. I know that he has immense personal experience and connections with people in Yemen. I want to reassure him that our position on Yemen is not dictated by the strategic partnership that we have with Saudi Arabia. What we say to Saudi Arabia and the UAE is that we are absolutely clear that these matters will not be repeated, but I do not see how we can have confidence that that would be the case if Mohammed bin Salman remains in place. If the lessons are to be learned and we are to honour Jamal Khashoggi’s life work by ensuring a more open society in Saudi Arabia where criticism is seen as an asset to good policymaking and where there is a more open press to report this criticism, it can only come if there is a change of Government at the very top.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): A free press is essential to scrutinise power wherever it may be. If the Foreign Secretary is truly to honour Jamal Khashoggi’s death, as he clearly wishes to do, he will commit today to challenging anywhere and everywhere any Government who seek to persecute, torture or in any way hold back the actions of a free press. Can he tell us a bit more about what he will be doing to promote that value worldwide?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. I do agree with her because attacks on journalists are becoming more frequent and they strike at the heart of everything we believe in when it comes to our democratic process. So, what can we do? First, what have I done? I make a point of raising the issue of journalists whom I am worried about with any regime that I meet—I raised the case of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, the Burmese Reuters journalists, when I met Aung San Suu Kyi. That is a practical thing and it is very important. I want all British embassies around the world to engage in that work where we have concerns about the welfare of journalists and about due process for journalists in prison, but there is a question as to whether we need to engage in a wider campaign to highlight the issue of media freedom, and that is something that we are considering at the moment.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Further to that question, without in any way wishing to diminish the horror of what happened to Mr Khashoggi, is the Secretary of State aware that Mr Khashoggi is one of 72 journalists, citizen journalists and media assistants who have been killed so far this year, according to Reporters Sans Frontières? May I, therefore, very much
Mr Hunt: We keep our travel advice constantly under review. For example, I have recently changed the travel advice for dual nationals going to Iran. If we think there are heightened risks, we will say so. We are aware that some of the individuals who have been talked about in the press may have visited the United Kingdom when the Crown Prince came for his official visit, and we are looking carefully into what activities they undertook.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May I endorse the words of the Foreign Secretary in his statement and urge him to put pressure on the Saudis, first to make sure that the body of Jamal Khashoggi is found promptly and that the man is laid to rest, and secondly so that our Saudi colleagues know fine well that under no circumstances can this behaviour be tolerated? Freedom of the press, if it is to mean anything, must be something that the Saudis demonstrate forthwith as part of a meaningful move forward.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on all those points. I would add that part of the reason for the strategic partnership we have with Saudi Arabia is stopping brutality by the Saudis, and other terrorist organisations, which is why it is of particular concern when there are reports that the Saudi state itself may have been involved in such brutality. That is why we have to get to the bottom of this.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Just as it would be perverse for the Kremlin to investigate MH17 or the Salisbury incident, it would be utterly perverse for the House of Saud to have its fingerprints anywhere near this investigation. Although I would like to see the Foreign Secretary introduce an arms embargo, I welcome his announcement about the Trade Secretary not attending the upcoming summit in Saudi Arabia. Will he confirm that it will not just be Ministers who will not be going but that there will not be one official from any Department in London or from any of our embassies around the world?

Mr Hunt: We have made the decision about the Trade Secretary. We are looking at all of the attendance of other British officials and we will make a final decision shortly, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I think it is highly unlikely.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): First, let me express my absolute revulsion over this incident. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must avoid grandstanding until we know the full facts of what occurred? Any journalist, including Mr Khashoggi himself, who was such a great campaigner for freedom of speech, would understand that this is essential. Does my right hon. Friend agree with that and does he agree that, as and when necessary, we will use our influence and we will act?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The issue here is that in this country we support due process, which is what the reports suggest is absolutely what did not happen in the case of Mr Khashoggi. We must be true to our principles; we need to wait until this investigation is complete and then we need to support proper due process for anyone who was responsible for his terrible murder.
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Germany has halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The Secretary of State prefers to wait. Is he suggesting that there is some way in which Mr Khashoggi could have met his death in the embassy that would be acceptable to him, and will he accept that whatever the result of the investigation, responsibility for the murder must lie with the autocratic ruler of what has now been shown to be a murderous state?

Mr Hunt: I have made it very clear that we need to find out who was ultimately responsible for happened and act accordingly, but on the question about arms sales, I think the hon. Lady is misrepresenting the approach we have in this country, which, as I mentioned earlier, was set up by Robin Cook, a Labour Foreign Secretary. In the past few years, we have suspended or revoked licences for arms sales to Russia, Ukraine, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In 2015 alone, we refused 331 licences. We have one of the strictest regimes in the world, and we will follow the proper processes that we have in place in the case of Saudi Arabia as well.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The idea that a man walked into the Saudi embassy and did not walk out while his wife was outside is simply appalling, and the accounts we have heard lack credibility. I have said in this place before that I was glad to see what seemed to be progress on women’s rights and opportunities in Saudi, but this is not the sort of behaviour that we can accept from an ally. May I support my right hon. Friend’s demand for a robust account of what happened and his plan to take robust action?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely—we will be extremely robust if these reports turn out to be true.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This hideous crime took place in a Saudi embassy on Turkish soil. They are two countries known for imprisoning journalists regularly with impunity. The Foreign Secretary and his Government have so far refused even to countenance the suspension of arms sales to either Saudi Arabia or, indeed, any country like Turkey. Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House whether he prioritises human rights or arms sales?

Mr Hunt: I think that the hon. Gentleman is creating a totally false dichotomy. We have a proper, established, robust and thorough regime that is designed to make sure that we do not sell arms to countries where there is a clear risk of breaches of international humanitarian law. That applies to countries such as Saudi Arabia as well as lots of countries to which we could sell arms but to which we do not, because that clear risk exists. At the same time, when we look at the representations made by British ambassadors and British Ministers all over the world and at the fact we have the third largest development budget in the world, I think that it is hard to find a country that does more on human rights, but the point is that we have to do both.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was lucky enough to meet the Turkish Foreign Minister some 10 days ago as details were emerging of this horrific event, and he was visibly and viscerally upset by what he was being told, of which we of course do not yet know the full facts. I welcome the measured tones of the Foreign Secretary’s statement, but does he have any timescale in mind for the investigation that will take place in Turkey, and has he offered full assistance to the Turks?

Mr Hunt: I, too, had a long conversation with Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, and I echo what my hon. Friend has said; I think he was deeply personally shocked by the story. I do not think that the investigation will take a long time to conclude. All the suggestions are that it might even conclude in a matter of days. That is very important, because we need to start proper accountability through the judicial system for the people who were responsible for this terrible crime.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): UNESCO reports that nine out of 10 killings of journalists go unpunished. The Foreign Secretary’s commitment to hold Saudi to account is undermined by his Government’s choosing expediency over honour and sending UK officials, diplomats, to Riyadh this week. Will he give credibility to his commitment to justice and support the call by the International Federation of Journalists for a UN convention on the safety of journalists and media professionals?

Mr Hunt: I completely reject the hon. Lady’s suggestion that we are choosing expediency. As I said in answer to the last question, I do not think any country does more than we do to champion human rights in every corner of the globe. We do that sometimes at commercial cost and often at diplomatic cost, but we do it differently in different countries. With countries such as China, if we were to raise such issues publicly, we would just lose access to the people who can make a difference. There are other countries where we raise such issues more publicly. The question is whether we raise them, and we do. The idea of a UN convention could be very interesting, and I will certainly look at it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How stable is the Saudi regime?

Mr Hunt: That is a question that I would not want to answer in a hurry at the Dispatch Box, but I echo the answer I gave to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee: autocratic regimes are inherently less stable.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments about the fear that is felt by journalists around the world. In the Council of Europe, the platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists identifies 126 journalists who are detained across member states of the Council of Europe. The committee of Ministers stresses that the law should provide for aggravated penalties to be applicable to public officials who act in a way that prevents or obstructs investigations. The Secretary of State has spoken about the rules-based order. Is it not the case that we can do far more with friends and closer friends? Is it not our duty to do so, and to do so loudly, so that others hear us say that journalists and freedom of speech must be protected?

Mr Hunt: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am very concerned about that growing trend. Of particular concern to me is the increasing sense among autocratic regimes that they can take this kind of action
with impunity. This is not something on which Britain can act alone, so we need to build an international consensus with our democratic friends across the world. We need to say that such actions are unacceptable not just in our countries but anywhere in the world, and we need to use every bit of influence we have to enact that.

_Bim Afolami_ (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I listened to the Foreign Secretary’s statement with care. Could he explain further to the House how collaboration with France and Germany has worked in this instance? It shows that despite the fact that we are going through quite tortuous negotiations to do with leaving the European Union, on issues of common cause, such as the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, we can find friendship and close collaboration with our European friends and partners.

_Mr Hunt_: That is an important question, which is, in a way, linked to the previous statement we had from the Prime Minister. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that such incidents remind us and our EU friends of the importance of our ongoing diplomatic partnership and friendship with Europeans. In such an instance of human rights violations, it is easy for the country responsible to start picking off people who say things that it does not like. That is why standing side by side with others—not just Germany and France but, I am sure, in this case, the United States—is a very important tool to have in one’s diplomatic armoury.

_Wes Streeting_ (Ilford North) (Lab): The integrity of the rules-based international system relies on red lines and on consequences for breaching those red lines. What has happened to Jamal Khashoggi should be a red line, but so should the bombing of a bus full of children in Yemen, and so should the detention of the Lebanese Prime Minister.

If, as appears to be the case today, the Foreign Secretary is not yet willing to put forward a UN resolution, as the shadow Foreign Secretary has suggested; if he is not willing to call for an independent investigation, as the shadow Foreign Secretary has suggested; and if he is not willing to put in place the immediate suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, as the shadow Foreign Secretary has suggested, will he at the very least make sure that not a single Minister or a single official goes to that conference, which has been dubbed “Davos in the desert”? If the Foreign Secretary sends British officials to the conference in such circumstances, all the words that we have heard today—Labour Members welcome them—will ring hollow, and he will send a message to every tyranny in the world that they can do what they like, because there will be no consequences from the democracies of this world.

_Mr Hunt_: The hon. Gentleman is somewhat misrepresenting the Government’s position. In answer to an earlier question, I said that it was highly unlikely that any British official would be attending, and we are reviewing the position at the moment. We have already said that the Trade Secretary will not be going. If we are to have red lines, they have to be credible and they have to be based on evidence. We cannot make decisions when an investigation has not yet been completed. That is against due process, and it would not be the right thing to do. We have to allow the investigation to happen and the full facts to emerge before we take our decision.

_Kevin Foster_ (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the joint statement between ourselves, France and Germany, showing a united front on what could be an appalling crime. What further steps is the Foreign Secretary planning to take in the international community to ensure that we get the answers we need?

_Mr Hunt_: First, we have made it clear in our regular contact with the Saudi authorities that there has to be a proper independent investigation and a credible explanation from Saudi Arabia of what happened, and we do not believe that we have had that to date. Secondly, when the facts emerge and when they have been confirmed, we will make a judgment with our allies about the appropriate thing to do. We have had lots of suggestions today of things that we could do, and we will make a considered response. I think that we have been very clear that that response will be commensurate with the scale of what has happened.

_Arden Slaughter_ (Hammersmith) (Lab): CNN is reporting today, based on CCTV obtained from Turkish security, that a member of the assassination squad walked around Istanbul in Jamal Khashoggi’s clothes after he was killed, in an attempt to show that he left the consulate alive. That shows a level of co-ordination that must have come from the top, and I do not know how much more evidence the Foreign Secretary needs to be persuaded of that. When he is persuaded, will one of the steps that he considers be to suspend diplomatic relations with what is increasingly seen as a bandit regime?

_Mr Hunt_: If the hon. Gentleman were in my shoes, he would not be announcing the actions that the United Kingdom would be taking until the proper investigation had been completed. I read the same media reports as the hon. Gentleman does, and when I see the stories of a body double of Khashoggi walking around the streets of Istanbul even though his fiancée waited outside the consulate for 11 hours for him to come out, it suggests to me that the story we are getting from Saudi Arabia is not yet credible. If we are to continue this strategic partnership, we need a credible explanation for what happened and we need to see the results of that investigation. I could not have been clearer: we will take serious action if these stories turn out to be true.

_Mr Philip Hollobone_ (Kettering) (Con): We need to encourage liberal internal reforms in Saudi Arabia, and we need Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against the spread of Iranian-backed terrorist proxies across the middle east, but how can we persuade an absolute monarchy that political assassination is not a legitimate tool of government?

_Mr Hunt_: That is a very thoughtful question, and I think the answer is that all absolute monarchs feel somewhat insecure about their position. The way to increase their sense of security is to go down the path of reform, because that is what creates social stability, which in the end makes countries and their populations more stable. That is what we need to encourage.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As has been alluded to, this is not the first time that critics of the Crown Prince have been attacked. In September, a Saudi human rights activist who sought refuge in the UK—in London—was attacked in Knightsbridge, allegedly by Saudi forces, after his location was revealed on social media. In such circumstances, what is the Secretary of State doing to protect citizens and defend freedom of speech in the United Kingdom, which is particularly critical of Saudi Arabia?

Mr Hunt: We have some of the toughest laws in the world to defend freedom of speech in this country. We will always do what it takes to defend that, and the independence of our press is the most powerful weapon we have in that respect. We are looking at all these issues and I want to reassure the hon. Lady that, when it comes to media freedom, we recognise that there is a pattern of wrongdoing here, and we are very concerned about it.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): First they said that Jamal Khashoggi had left the consulate alive. Then they said that he had died in a fight. While of course it is right to listen to the third explanation from the Saudi authorities, does my right hon. Friend agree that the credibility of those explanations has been seriously undermined by their decision to publish what is manifestly implausible?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree. Until we get to a place where the Saudi authorities are giving an explanation that they can corroborate and that is consistent with the evidence from other sources, people will continue to ask the questions that my hon. Friend is asking, and we will continue to not feel that we can have confidence that the Saudi authorities understand the gravity of what has happened and will truly make sure that it never happens again.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Many of us recognise the important strategic and economic relationship that we have with Saudi Arabia but simultaneously believe that its actions in recent months have simply put them beyond the pale. While of course we will allow the Turks to investigate what happened on their land, will the Foreign Secretary say that there is no credibility whatsoever to the suggestion that a 15-man hit squad came from Saudi Arabia and took part in the things that we have heard about but had no links back to Mohammed bin Salman?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is making the point that many hon. Members have made, which is that the explanations we have had from Saudi Arabia about what happened lack credibility. It is vital that this changes. The world needs to know what is happening, and if the world is to have confidence that Saudi Arabia is reforming and that these kinds of things will never happen again, we need to see a different approach.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I declare an interest, as per the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: from March 2016 to January 2018, I advised the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, an independent think-tank and non-governmental organisation.

All those involved in the callous, brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi have to be held accountable at every level. One way to do that would be for the United Kingdom to call for an independent investigation at the United Nations, as was done following the murder of Rafic Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, and in the case of Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, with whom I worked for eight years before coming to this place.

What we have seen from the Government of Saudi Arabia is pathetic, inconsistent explanation after explanation. The Foreign Secretary talks about consequences, and I urge him to ensure that the consequences are firm and decisive at every level, otherwise we get into the concept of “might is right”, which leads to anarchy and chaos. I welcome his statement.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have to see what the outcome of this investigation is. If it is not credible or consistent with the facts on the ground, the avenues that he suggests may well be worth exploring.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that his own Department has criticised Turkish authorities in the past, based on their human rights record. Can he tell us a bit more about what discussions are taking place between his Department and the Turkish authorities on this investigation? Will he commit to meet the International Federation of Journalists, as others have suggested, to talk about a United Nations convention on protecting journalists? It is unacceptable that one in 10 killings of journalists ends up with a prosecution.

Mr Hunt: We have had extensive discussions with the Turkish authorities about their investigation, and we are encouraged that they think it will only be a matter of a few days before the full results are announced. I would be happy to meet the International Federation of Journalists.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary is correct to say that the full facts of this barbaric murder have not emerged yet, but key facts have emerged. It seems utterly implausible that the top forensic pathologist from Saudi Arabia is dispatched, equipped with a bone saw, when this is something to do with a fist fight. I was also shocked to learn that that named individual who visited the consulate in Istanbul was a graduate of Glasgow University, which raises questions about the unhealthy relationship between higher education institutions in this country and Saudi Arabia. Will the Foreign Secretary consider calling on Glasgow University to strip this barbarian of his degree in the first instance?

Mr Hunt: I am sure that the university will consider doing exactly that if he is found responsible for the crimes that are being alleged, but obviously that would be a matter for the university. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point; he is saying what many hon. Members have said, which is that the accounts we have heard from Saudi Arabia as to why this happened do not seem to match the facts on the ground.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State correct the record? I think he misspoke earlier when he said that the coalition Government...
had strengthened arms controls. The Committees on Arms Export Controls said in 2014 that there was a “substantive weakening” of the controls, and the Government themselves said that there was no material change.

The Foreign Secretary referred in his statement to the judicial review of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The review said that the CAEC conducted the independent scrutiny, but the Secretary of State for International Trade refused to attend CAEC hearings last year. Will he attend CAEC hearings this year? The Foreign Secretary himself has said that the Saudi investigation into this murder is not credible, so why do the Saudis investigate their own war crimes in Yemen? Will the Foreign Secretary now demand a UN investigation into this rogue state? Will he also acknowledge that security information from this state is rarely useful, as a senior civil servant said today on the radio, and that we should suspend co-operation in that area?

Mr Hunt: It is for the Home Office to make its assessment of the usefulness of the counter-terrorism intelligence-sharing relationship that we have with Saudi Arabia. All I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that the information I have had is that it is important. With respect to his other comments, I was telling the House what I have been informed of in my briefing notes by the Foreign Office, but I am happy to write to him to explain why I said what I said.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I gave notice of this point of order to the Speaker’s Office this afternoon. It is about the Government’s widespread briefing in today’s papers about their taking new powers and initiatives on grade inflation in universities and whether the Minister for Universities will use the teaching excellence framework to facilitate that without having brought this matter to the House.

Amendment 23C to the Higher Education and Research Bill required the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the TEF within a year of the Act’s commencement, requiring that the review and subsequent review must cover all aspects of the TEF and whether it is fit for purpose. The Government gave me a commitment in writing that they would announce the review by autumn 2018. Despite that, they have failed to bring anything forward on the independent review, yet today they have been briefing the press on their plans to use the TEF for this new purpose, even though they have not even announced its review. In the light of that, is it right for the Department for Education to push out policy changes on the hoof to the media, without coming to the House to give a proper statement?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As ever, he knows, and the House knows, that that is not a matter on which the Chair can rule or take immediate action, but I can well understand from his description of what has happened why he wants to bring the matter to the attention of the House, and by raising this point of order, he has very effectively done so. I hope that the relevant Minister will note what he has said, but if he does not get the response that he hopes to get in the proper way, I am sure that he will raise this matter again with the Chair through one of the orderly ways in which such matters can be raised.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hesitate to raise yet another point of order on the ongoing clinical waste fiasco, especially as Mr Speaker has very generously granted me two urgent questions about it in recent weeks. However, it seems that every time the Minister for Health comes to the House, his statement unravels within days. Last week, he was specifically asked whether it was true that unqualified drivers were driving hazardous waste from Yorkshire to Slough. He did not answer and he said he was not aware of what was happening in Slough. Now we learn, yet again from the Health Service Journal, that Department for Transport officials had in fact granted a special licence for this waste to be transported in this particular way, even though it is in breach of the normal safety regulations. Indeed, just last week another licence was granted—this was before the Minister came to the House—to Mitie to allow it to take waste to Slough, and yet another licence was granted to allow it to take waste to Littlehampton in west Sussex.

The Minister did not say any of this in his statement last week, so could you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, of an appropriate way to express my disappointment.
and get it on the record? Could you also let me know whether you think that Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care are as clueless as those making decisions in the Department for Transport?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. On this second point, no, I could not let him know whether I think that Ministers are useless or perfect in the way in which they undertake their duties. That is a straight answer from me: no, I could not let him know that.

On the hon. Gentleman’s very important point, he will know, as the House knows, that of course the Chair is not responsible in any way for what a Minister says at the Dispatch Box; that is up to the Minister. I assume that the Minister has said what he has said in good faith, but the hon. Gentleman has an argument with that. He has asked me how he can put his concerns on the record, and again I will give him a straight answer: he has just done so most effectively. I am sure he will get a response from the Minister, and if not, I am sure he will be able to use one of the proper forms of bringing a question of an urgent nature to this House.

We now come to the presentation of a Bill by Mr Frank Field. The notice of presentation has been withdrawn.

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS BILL
Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 8 to 12 together.

Ordered,

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE
That Patrick Grady be discharged from the Administration Committee and Marion Fellows be added.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE
That Michelle Donelan be discharged from the Education Committee and Mr Ben Bradley be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
That Bim Afolami and Luke Graham be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Nigel Mills and Chris Davies be added.

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
That Paul Masterton be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Kirstene Hair be added.

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
That Glyn Davies be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Guto Bebb be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Paediatric Cancers of the Central Nervous System
Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.34 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to have been granted this important Adjournment debate. In all honesty, I wish I was not having to take part in it, but on 29 January, Cian Case, a six-year-old little boy from Llanharan in my constituency, tragically died after suffering a relapse of an aggressive cancer of his central nervous system. Cian was a young, gentle and happy young boy whose life was lost too early—far too early. It was a privilege to meet Cian at a fundraising rugby match in March 2016. I will never forget his warmth and acute sense of humour about his condition, or indeed the look of joy on his face at the fact that the community had come out in their hundreds to support him.

Cancer is a foe that every single Member will have experience of. Whether it be a sibling, a parent, an aunt, an uncle, a friend or even somebody we have just got to know in passing, Members across this House, as well as the people we serve, will have had cancer touch their lives and will know of its life-shattering effects. There is no good time for anybody to get cancer, but as I am sure you would agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is particularly harrowing and particularly life-changing to live through your child’s suffering with, and eventually dying from, this terrible disease.

It may come as a surprise to many Members across the House that, on this occasion, I do not stand here to point the finger of blame at the Government or to take a swipe at the NHS in England, or indeed in Wales. Instead, I seek to tell Cian’s story in the hope that we can work together, on a cross-party and cross-Government basis, to help to ensure that no family has to go through what Cian Case’s family underwent.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and on speaking so movingly about his young constituent. Having experienced having a seriously ill child, I know that one vital thing in such a situation is the care that hospitals provide not just for the child, but for the parents and the carers who spend a great deal of time there. Does he agree that there should also be a focus on that as we move forward on this crucial issue?

Chris Elmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to him for the bravery that he and his wife, Rebecca, have shown over William. I am so pleased to see pictures of him now looking so well and on the road to recovery.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward such an important issue as an Adjournment debate. We have some three hours to complete the debate, so he has tons of time. About 400 children are diagnosed with a central nervous system tumour in the UK each year, accounting for a quarter of all childhood cancer cases. Like the hon. Gentleman, I salute the doctors, nurses and carers for all the work that they do in looking after these children. Survival rates for other cancers have significantly increased
in the past 50 years, but the same cannot be said for brain tumours. Many charities and research groups are working in collaboration to find a cure. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be done to raise awareness, find a cure and ensure that parents are fully aware of the key signs and symptoms in babies and young children?

Chris Elmore: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. I hope my speech will go some way to highlighting that more work is needed, and to paying tribute to parents and families who have lost children through this horrendous condition.

Cian was first diagnosed with an atypical teratoid/rhabdoid tumour in 2015, when he was four years old. This type of tumour, often called an AT/RT, is a very rare and rapidly growing tumour of the central nervous system. Cian’s primary tumour was found on his spine, with seeds of the cancer also found in his brain. In the majority of cases, AT/RT is associated with a specific genetic mutation, INI1, which can occur spontaneously or be inherited. However, genetic testing in Cian’s instance did not indicate that he had this specific mutation. Cian’s tumour was located on his spine. AT/RTs are generally located anywhere in the brain, but are most commonly found in the cerebellum—the base of the brain—and in the brain stem, which is the part of the brain that controls basic body functions. The fact that Cian’s tumour bucked this trend made a difficult medical situation even more complex. AT/RT was previously thought to have been a type of medulloblastoma. However, it is now known that this is a totally different type of cancer and cannot therefore be treated via the same methods.

Mercifully, childhood cancer is rare in itself. The majority of children who are sadly subjected to this disease are diagnosed with a form of leukaemia. Brain tumours are much more rare, and AT/RTs make up only between 1% and 2% of these cases. I hope this illustrates just how tragic it was that Cian contracted not just cancer, but a cancer of the rarest of forms. This, however, is exactly why we have to do something to remember Cian and ensure that his legacy is that other families may be prevented from suffering a similar fate.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his wonderful speech and pay tribute to Cian’s family for all they have done on this issue. Will my hon. Friend say about the importance of specific funding for childhood brain tumours, including rare conditions such as DIPG? May I also through him urge the Minister to look again at support, especially financial support, for families who travel long distances—in Kaleigh’s case, to Mexico—to access experimental, often successful and life-extending, treatment? That needs to be looked at, so that in future the life expectancy of a child depends not on how much money their parents have or can raise, but on whether our Government are prepared to ensure that all children have access to potentially life-extending treatment.

Chris Elmore: I agree, and I will touch on the impact on families later in my speech. People talk of the late Baroness Jowell—Tessa—and her legacy. There can be no greater legacy than securing the additional research funding through her campaign on tackling the causes of brain tumours. Of her many great achievements, that has to be the one that will live with all of us the longest.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware of CLIC Sargent’s campaign. In an event today, the charity highlighted the cost of travel for families with children who are in treatment. The average is about £200 per month. We need to do a lot more to support families and to cover some of those costs.

Chris Elmore: I agree. Often with children’s cancer, one member of the family—usually the mother—has to give up their job to be a carer. That has a massive impact on the family. I completely agree with my hon. Friend that that has to be addressed.
Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being generous with his time, debating an important subject that has been raised several times in this House. I rise to pay tribute to two constituents—Alex Logan and Luke Stewart—who lost their lives recently. I have spoken to the Minister and others about treatment abroad, and I urge the Minister and the NHS to look more widely for possible cures and to be—I phrase this carefully—more open-minded about where the answers may lie.

Chris Elmore: I agree with my hon. Friend and endorse his tribute to his two constituents. I will speak later about some of my asks regarding international research, to which I hope the Minister will respond positively.

It is of course vital that we continue to undertake the best research possible into brain tumours in adults, but I must impress upon the Minister that it is essential that we give equal priority to childhood cancers. It is extremely positive to see groundbreaking work being undertaken in Wales, including through the Wales Cancer Research Centre, which is funded by the Welsh Government and led by Cardiff University. In recent years, it has been very positive to see the new drug/radiation combination trials coming to Wales, which could lead to new world-leading treatments being made available in the Welsh NHS. Clinicians and politicians of all political colours agree that this is an uphill struggle, but I know that it is a fight that colleagues in the Welsh Government will face head-on.

I pay tribute to the charities doing such vital work to advance research. I am pleased that the charity Brain Tumour Research is working closely with Cardiff University to fund research into some of the most aggressive forms of brain tumours. I know that Brain Tumour Research and CLIC Sargent have raised concerns about the hidden costs of treatments for the families of patients being treated for such cancers. CLIC Sargent finds that parents of children suffering from cancer spend as much as £600 a month on top of their normal travel expenses. We must work together, across health boundaries, to decrease that cost and provide financial support where possible.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Cian’s parents? As a parent in a similar position, I know how difficult it is for them to talk about their personal loss and to campaign for their son. They should be applauded for their courage in allowing us to discuss this important issue.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for her, as ever, courteous and heartfelt intervention. I know of the trauma she is facing in her family life. Richard and Lorraine are extraordinary people, as are their wider family. I have been impressed by their courage throughout Cian’s illness and, now, his passing.

We must not forget those who are lucky enough to survive such aggressive forms of cancer. Survivors often face a lifetime of other health complications, including mobility issues, cognitive challenges, infertility, growth complications and other conditions that require a high level of medical support. We must ensure that aftercare for those children is world class, and that they are able to lead as full, happy and long a life as possible.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this Adjournment debate to raise awareness of an important health condition. He described how the tumour affecting his constituent was in the cerebellum and is now discussing the long-term effects for survivors of childhood brain tumours. Both treatment and recovery are determined to some degree by the location of the tumour, which can vary widely. I remember clearly a young patient who had a tumour so close to her brainstem—the part of the brain that controls breathing, which we do not think consciously about—that she had to live in intensive care for many months during her treatment, because at any point she could stop breathing. I remember sitting with her when she was making a cotton wool collage of a winter scene and she simply stopped breathing. When she was awake, one could say, “Breathe,” and she would make a conscious effort to breathe; if she was asleep or distracted, or no one was paying attention, she would have passed away. She needed that constant reminder. That is why it is important to ensure not only that we have research and medical treatment during illness, but that for recovery there is a multi-disciplinary team—physios, speech therapists, occupational therapists and so on—so that children who survive these awful tumours make the fullest possible recovery and can live the fullest possible lives afterward.

Chris Elmore: I agree with the hon. Lady entirely. There is clearly a need to look not just at treatment but at what comes next. If we are to improve survival rates, which we must—research is a key part of that—then we need to look at what comes next for these families and for the children who, touch wood, will survive.

Mark Tami: We must not forget mental health either. It is very important that we provide support and counselling afterwards. After what these young people have gone through, it is important they receive mental health support.

Chris Elmore: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. It is such an important part of the recovery that families go through. That a child has cancer is in itself a huge trauma. What comes next is so important, and mental health for both the child and the family cannot be forgotten. This again underlines the life-changing effects of cancers such as AT/RT on a child. It will in all likelihood impact on every aspect of their life.

There is a great deal of positive work happening in this House. I would like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and her colleagues on the all-party group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer, who recently held an inquiry into patient experiences of childhood cancers, the findings of which were published this year. After discussing the inquiry with my hon. Friend, I would like to thank the Minister for the positive contribution he made to it. I ask him and the Secretary of State to look at the report’s recommendations. Many are comparatively inexpensive and would make a huge difference to the children and their families who find themselves in this situation. I appeal to the Minister to update the House on his response to the all-party group’s findings.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for the very kind tribute he paid to the all-party group for its inquiry. Many of the panel members are in the House today. I would just like to add my support to what he has just
asked of the Minister. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be good if the Government could commit to greater education and awareness? Although it is rare, the signs and symptoms of cancer in children need to be picked up early. The earlier they are picked up, the more likely it is that treatment is successful.

**Chris Elmore:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I again pay tribute to her and her leadership not just on childhood cancer but on cancer generally. She is a true heroine of the cause and we are extremely grateful to have her in this House. It is clear that there is positive work being undertaken on this issue, but it has to be said that we can do more, much more, to help to tackle this disease.

Members across the House will remember when our dearly missed friend, the late Baroness Jowell, spoke so movingly, just days before Cian passed away last January, about the need to work much harder to make brain tumour research more effective. Tessa stressed the need to support the Eliminate Cancer Initiative to improve the chances of tackling this rare illness internationally.

The creation of a clinical trial network around the world, an increase in the use of active trials, and the use of a global database would help to improve research and patient care. As Tessa so rightly said, through sharing knowledge across borders, and thereby at a local level across medical governance structures, we will be best placed to advance our knowledge of the most difficult and rare forms of cancers, including cancers of the central nervous system.

Making that happen will involve further investment in research into specific tumours such as AT/RT, and international collaboration to ensure that we have the best minds and the most innovative technology working on the most difficult of challenges. I believe the UK Government can be doing more to facilitate that. When Ministers visit other countries abroad, more often than not the two principal reasons for the trip are to further international trade or promote international security, both of which are of course vital. However, it is my view that in discussions with our foreign counterparts the issue of international research must rise up the agenda if we are to have any hope of accelerating our efforts in this area.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I am reluctant to introduce Brexit to this debate as we spend so much time discussing it, but on that specific point we have to ensure that we maintain research co-operation with other EU member states, not least so that we get the scale of rare cancers. In the week in which my local NHS trust announced it is closing the chemotherapy unit at King George hospital because of a shortage of chemotherapy nurses, may I gently ask the Minister to ensure that we recruit and retain, from both here and across EU member states, the staff we need to provide the high quality of care and treatment our constituents so desperately rely on?

**Chris Elmore:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I will move on to the big B and the big C shortly.

Many of the children Cian was in hospital with had previously been sent abroad to participate in medical trials, including proton therapy. Will the Minister please look at what more we can do to collaborate with international drug trials and trials of new therapies to ensure that we have the most up-to-date treatments available here in the UK? Just as cancer affects so many people, so our efforts to counter it must include as many people as possible. This is simply not something that we can tackle alone.

Sadly, while the majority of my remarks have been about the big C, I must, as ever, touch on the big B. As we leave the European Union, it cannot be stressed enough how important it is for us to continue to work with our European partners to fund research, and indeed to undertake research ourselves into rare cancers. It is vital that we continue to play our part in EU research and development projects of genuine international importance. We must also continue to work with the European Association for Cancer Research, because we simply cannot sacrifice the potential new cancer treatments we will uncover in the name of, in my view, a misguided sense of regaining sovereignty. Indeed, the current treatment is agreed at EU level. Having first been established in 2002, the treatment was last fully reviewed in 2009. The drugs being used to treat this type of cancer are old in relative terms, showing what a vital role international governance can and will play in helping to improve outcomes in the future. Overall, the message I want to get across today is clear. So many cancers rightly receive a great deal of attention and research funding. I would argue that, just because rarer cancers, such as the one Cian suffered from, affect fewer people, that does not mean that we should not be as targeted or as innovative in our efforts to fight them.

If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to mention briefly the brilliant and selfless work Cian’s family have been doing to raise awareness of this particular type of cancer, and their work in fighting for new research and treatments for such paediatric cancers. Cian’s father, Richard, is in the Gallery today. I pay tribute to him and Cian’s mum, Lorraine, and his siblings Dillan aged 11 and Bethan aged 9, for their bravery. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] From when Cian was first diagnosed in November 2015, to when he was told in June 2016 that the tumours had gone, through to when he sadly relapsed in November 2017, his family have tirelessly raised awareness. His community have fundraised and, since his passing, they have continued their efforts.

I pay tribute to Cian’s family for all their efforts in the most difficult of circumstances. I would like to thank the whole community of Llanharan, the surrounding villages and far beyond, whose support for Cian has been unwavering. The online funding page set up following Cian’s death raised in excess of £6,000, which is going to help the charities who supported Cian and his family throughout his treatment. I am sure you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this shows what a mark this little boy has made on his local community. Likewise, I am so proud of all the staff, pupils and parents at Llanharan primary school, the school Cian attended, who were so supportive to Cian throughout his journey and who have been there for his parents and friends since. I was privileged to attend the memorial event they held shortly after Cian died, which brought together my constituents from the many communities across Ogmore, but I have to say that being part of this outpouring of love in the most tragic of circumstances...
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I, too, wish we were not here, but let me congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this evening’s debate. I commend him on his support and the incredible tribute he gave to Cian and Cian’s family this evening, and on the way he has handled the debate. For those who know him, in both the Government and the Opposition, it is rather typical of the man.

From what we have heard this evening, it is clear that Cian was a very special little boy who touched many people in his short life. I have seen his “Cian’s Kicking Cancer” campaign online, including the picture of him with his hands out in front of the No. 10 Downing Street door—it is a lovely photo—and I pay tribute to the determination of Cian’s parents to raise awareness of paediatric cancers. The way that they have been supported by their local MP is brilliant.

As the cancer Minister, I all too often hear of the devastation that this terrible disease can bring to people and their families, but nothing is as heartbreaking as when a child is affected. I said last week in the breast cancer debate that a life lived long or a life lived short is still a life lived, and I passionately believe that if a life lived, short or long, still leaves an indelible mark on this world and still changes this world forever, even in a small way. From what the hon. Gentleman has told the House this evening, there is no question but that Cian has left his mark and changed the world a little bit. We will do our best to honour that and see whether we can change it a bit more.

Every day, at least 12 children and young people are told that they have cancer. When they are born—I have children myself—we all imagine bright futures for our children and the things that we want them to do, but cancer robs many children of that future and the opportunity to fulfil their potential. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is relatively rare in young children, but that is absolutely no consolation to the parents of a child with cancer. It can even be worse to know that and inevitably leads to questions such as, “Why me? Why my child? They haven’t made any lifestyle choices.” Cancer is indiscriminately cruel, and that is one of those awful truths that we face in life.

It is great that we have so much time for this debate. I know that there has been a bit of knockabout that the business finished early again this evening, but I genuinely believe that there is a reason why that happened, and we are going to make the most of it. I start by reassuring the House and those watching that cancer absolutely is a priority for me—I think most people know that—and for this Government.

I happened to be in the Tea Room before coming into this debate and the Prime Minister popped in after her marathon stint on her statement this afternoon. She asked me what I was working on and I said that I was doing this debate tonight. We spoke about how remarkable the way in which the House comes together in these debates is and how there is a concentrated audience for such debates. I know that the hon. Gentleman has put out on social media networks, as I am sure many others have, the fact that this debate is happening tonight, and I know, many people will be watching, so let us be clear: fighting cancer is absolutely central, as the Prime Minister
said in her conference speech, to our long-term plan for the national health service in England—I have to say “in England”, because I am an English Health Minister, and the English cancer Minister. It will build on the progress already achieved in the cancer strategy and will set out how we will achieve our ambition that some 55,000 more people in England will survive cancer for five years each year from 2028.

I am absolutely committed to ensuring that our plan transforms outcomes for children with cancer over the next 10 years. The fantastic work being done by NHS cancer doctors and nurses, as well as the invaluable support that we get from our incredible cancer community, is helping us to achieve our vision of transforming cancer services for children and young people.

As I have said, childhood cancers are mercifully rare, but 1,600 children under 15 are still diagnosed each year in the UK. Central nervous system cancers are estimated to account for 25%, with 400 children diagnosed each year. Brain cancers alone account for more than 100 CNS cancers, making each cancer extremely rare.

It is true that survival for children’s cancer has gone up over the past decade, with five-year survival for children’s CNS cancers at 75%—that is how we measure it, but, of course, if people develop a cancer in their 70s, a five-year survival rate is a more significant achievement than for those who develop a cancer when they are under five. The survival rates have gone up, but there is not an ounce of complacency in me; we will and must keep working hard to go further and faster.

Treatment of CNS cancers varies depending on several factors—age, the tumour growth rate and the location and size of the tumour—but, as the hon. Gentleman said, it will usually involve a combination of surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, depending on the clinical need. To ensure that patients have access to the latest, most cutting-edge technology wherever they live, we have invested heavily—some £130 million—to modernise NHS radiotherapy equipment. Over the past two years, 73 trusts have had their older linear accelerators, as they are known, upgraded or replaced, and that is an important thing that we have done—[Interruption.]. Cheltenham is one of them, says my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—who says that PPSs do not speak in the House? He sits there diligently day in, day out, so why not?

The hon. Member for Ogmore mentioned proton beam therapy and I want to touch on that. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the use of PBT—for those who do not know, it is an advanced form of radiotherapy—for treating children with CNS tumours. It uses high-energy proton beams to treat the cancer much more precisely. These targeted doses of treatment have less impact on surrounding healthy tissue and fewer side-effects. In childhood cancers, that is critically important—the hon. Gentleman mentioned side-effects of treatment with regard to fertility, for instance.

Until now, PBT for children has been commissioned from overseas. We have sent children to America and to Germany. That is why we have invested £250 million to provide PBT services in England. I am delighted that the first NHS centre, at the Christie in Manchester, is scheduled to begin treating patients this autumn. A second facility is due to open at University College London Hospitals in London in 2020. I had the pleasure of visiting the Christie shortly after delivery of the giant ProBeam proton system, which is a significant engineering feat. The scale and complexity of the technology is truly breath-taking, and I am tremendously excited that we will shortly be providing PBT on the NHS in England, sparing patients the upheaval, discomfort and cost—I will come on to that—of travelling abroad for treatment.

Although survival rates for CNS cancers have been improving, some children will unfortunately suffer relapse, as we heard in Cian’s case, and treatment options can sadly be limited, even for palliative care. That is why NHS England is reviewing whether additional radiotherapy treatments, such as stereotactic radiosurgery and stereotactic radiotherapy—there is a difference—would be suitable for these patients. I am following that work closely, as I am interested in and excited by its potential.

This month, NHS England published the draft national genomic test directory for cancer, setting out how whole-genome sequencing for paediatric brain tumours and other genetic tests are now being considered for CNS cancers. I hope that introducing those tests will support better tumour identification and more targeted treatments for CNS cancers in children, and give hope to many others.

Perhaps the most exciting development in our efforts to treat childhood cancers successfully is the increasing availability of personalised treatments such as CAR-T therapy, about which there is understandably a lot of excitement in the medical community. With the introduction of more personalised and targeted treatments and different treatment options for children with CNS cancers, NHS England is reviewing how best to ensure that children receive the available treatment and from the relevant clinical team, now and in the future. We expect the availability of more personalised treatments to be a real game-changer for childhood cancers. The work is still in its early stages, and it will involve clinicians, service providers and charities as it progresses, but I will of course update the all-party group, which I will come to in a moment, as it develops.

Research, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, is a crucial part of the fight against brain tumours. In May, we announced £40 million over five years for brain tumour research through the National Institute for Health Research, as part of the late Tessa Jowell’s brain cancer mission, which includes research for children with brain cancer. I only met Baroness Jowell once, unfortunately, but I was left in no doubt about what she wanted me to do—her legendary determination was very much in evidence. I very much enjoyed meeting her and Jess, her daughter, who is carrying on much of the work.

The hon. Gentleman talked about research projects. Baroness Jowell’s mission is about stimulating quality research projects—a point that the late baroness was able to nail as soon as she started to look into it. Although the NIHR spent £137 million on cancer research in 2016-17—the largest ever investment in a disease area—it does not allocate funding for specific disease areas. It does not have a basket for each disease area. Spending has to be driven, therefore, by scientific potential and the number and scale of quality funding applications.

The baroness was very pithy and understood immediately that we needed to stimulate the market in brain tumour research to enable quality research proposals to come
forward. After that, the clinical research network, which is recruiting for or setting up more than 700 cancer trials and studies, including studies into childhood cancers and brain tumours, can press forward and do its work. Funding for paediatric cancer research is critical.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about international research. Absolutely agree that international collaboration is key for successful research on rare diseases such as CNS and childhood cancers. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that we want to work closely with Europe in science and research and that the UK is committed to establishing a far-reaching science and innovation pact with the EU, facilitating the exchange of ideas and researchers and enabling the UK to continue to participate in key programmes alongside our EU partners. Whatever “take back control” meant—one day I will be told—it did not mean that we are not to work with our EU partners in such areas. I am determined that it will not mean that, as are the Government. The Chancellor has also made it clear that he will guarantee EU structural and investment funding and underwrite payments for competitive EU research awards through the Horizon 2020 underwrite guarantee, which is a very important project.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Eliminate Cancer Initiative, which the late Baroness Jowell made sure I was acutely aware of. Its tagline “Making cancer non-lethal for the next generation” is really neat, and we certainly support it. It has huge global potential and reach. As he mentioned, given my international health brief, I travel to talk to Ministers from around the world. I was at the G20 earlier this month. The G20 and G7 have Health Minister meetings, as they should do; I certainly hope they will when we have the chair. I would like to see international research collaboration, specifically on cancer, on one of the G20 or G7 agendas. The hon. Gentleman’s point was made well. I will take it up with my officials so that, as we lobby for the chair of the next meetings, we talk about that. It would be an interesting piece of work that we as fellow Ministers could do. I know that people think that sometimes these international meetings are talking shops, and of course there is an element of that, but actually an awful lot of good stuff goes on and an awful lot of other agencies—the OECD, the World Bank, the EU—part of those meetings. If Ministers decide that this is part of our agenda, that will make a difference and move the dial.

Several Members have talked about awareness of childhood cancers and I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said about the all-party group on children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer. I am pleased to see my friend the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) in her place. I welcome the establishment of that all-party group on the specific needs of children and young people with cancer. It is an excellent all-party group—several of its members are or were here. I was delighted to give evidence to its patient experience inquiry earlier this year. She had some of her patient advocates there, who asked great questions as well, and I commend it for an excellent report. I do not have to do this for all-party groups—I do for Select Committees—but I have undertaken that the Department will respond line by line to its report. I will definitely do that. It is not ready yet, but it will happen.

One of the all-party group’s recommendations was on signs and symptoms, which I will come on to, and another was on the cost of travel. The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) mentioned the CLIC Sargeant report that highlighted the financial impact of travel on the families of young cancer patients. It is a really good piece of work. I assure hon. Members that the Government are working to review the service specifications for children and young people with cancer. This will help us to consider how some aspects of the patients pathway might be provided more locally to reduce the travel burden for patients and their families. There is the other element: sometimes that cannot be done and people have to travel for treatment. The NHS cannot do everything brilliantly everywhere—clearly, specialisms are sometimes needed. That is why we have the healthcare travel costs scheme, which is part of the NHS low income scheme. It allows for patients’ travel costs to be reimbursed if they are in receipt of a qualifying benefit or are on a low income. The scheme helped some 337,000 applicants to receive financial help with their NHS treatment. I am very interested in the recommendations of the all-party group on that and I assure its members that I am taking great note of them.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I am pleased to learn that my hon. Friend takes such an interest in reports from all-party parliamentary groups. Will he undertake to look equally carefully at the report that will be produced tomorrow by the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care, known as Together for Short Lives, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell)? It looks at how we provide palliative care for children with cancer and other life-limiting and life-threatening conditions.

Steve Brine: I will now take an intervention from the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Minister for his thoughtful response to the debate. Will he and the Department look carefully at the issue of access to experimental treatment and financial support, and also the issue of control? One of the conversations that I had with Tessa was about how she had to wrest back control over her own choice in relation to risk and access to experimental treatment.

It would be hard enough for adults to make such choices for themselves, but parents are having to make those difficult choices, too. Some parents feel that they are making the best decisions for their children in turning down the opportunity of access to experimental treatment on the basis of an assessment of the risk and the impact on the life that they have left, while others choose to access such treatment in the interests of their children. While there are challenges in respect of the governance and, perhaps, some of the ethics of those arrangements, we must put a bit more trust and faith in parents. When they choose to access experimental treatment, even if the Department will not fund access to the treatment itself, it might be able, reasonably and ethically, to provide more support than it currently provides in respect of the associated costs of, for instance, travel, accommodation and subsistence.

Steve Brine: I will look into that. The late Baroness and I talked about exactly that subject. I do not think it is so much about ethics; I think that this must be clinically led. There is a great deal of debate in the
clinical cancer community about the toxicity of concurrent treatments. However, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the costs, and the importance of supporting parents who must make decisions which are hard enough when people are making them for themselves.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) mentioned an all-party parliamentary group of which I was a member before I was a Minister. I take all-party parliamentary groups so seriously because I used to lead loads of them. I spent hours writing reports, and, dare I say, I wish that they were sometimes taken as seriously as I take such reports.

It is in all-party parliamentary groups that a lot of good work goes on in the House. Opposition Members, who are not in government at this time, have a huge role to play in moving the dial. The smart Ministers are the ones who say that they do not know everything. The lines that the civil service gives them are often great, but they are not the be-all and end-all. I see APPGs as a brilliant and rich vein of knowledge for me, and I learn a lot from them. So yes, I will look out for my hon. Friend’s work in Together for Short Lives.

My constituency contains one of the best children’s hospice trusts, Naomi House and Jacksplace. My heart goes out to the child hospice movement and my respect for it is ample, and what Together for Short Lives does to represent that movement is incredible.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):
There is also a fabulous children’s hospice in Stoke-on-Trent, the Donna Louise Trust, which goes above and beyond its remit to support not just children with life-limiting conditions, but their families. Most children’s hospices depend almost 100% on charitable giving and fundraising to undertake such work. Should not we, as a society, be considering that, and should not the state have a role in helping to provide the service when it is needed?

Steve Brine: There is a role for the state, but the hospice trust in my constituency told me many times that the last thing it wanted was to be 100% reliant on charitable giving and fundraising to undertake such work. Should not we, as a society, be considering that, and should not the state have a role in helping to provide the service when it is needed?

Before I went off on a tangent, I was talking about awareness of childhood cancers, which a number of Members mentioned. We must improve awareness of cancer, full stop. I am very proud of Be Clear on Cancer’s “blood in pee” campaign, which is part of my brief. However, as someone who has young children, I know that the challenge is striking the balance between educating children about the warning signs of cancer and frightening them about a risk that is relatively low at their age. My motto would be that the best must not be the enemy of the good.

A number of Members will know about the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust and Coppafeel! The hon. Member for Bristol West certainly does, because of the work that she has done in relation to breast cancer. Coppafeel!—I still think that that is the best name for a charity that I have heard since I have been doing this job—is run by Kris Hallenga, a brilliantly brave young lady who has terminal breast cancer. It ran a superb cancer awareness campaign in schools, about which I have talked to secondary schools in my constituency. It is sensitive and evidence-based, and pitched very appropriately.

I recently took both those charities to discuss their campaigns with the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). As the House will know from a statement made by the Secretary of State before the summer recess, the Department for Education will be consulting on its health education guidance until 7 November. I encourage charities, all-party parliamentary groups and parents to put forward their views on how we might go further to educate children about cancer. That is critical if we are serious about prevention, which we are.

Let me end by putting on record my tribute to the NHS doctors, nurses, support staff and charities, and our colleagues in the wider cancer community—Team Cancer, as I call it—who work so tirelessly every day to ensure that our constituents, and thousands of children like Cian, benefit from the support and the expertise that give them a chance of recovery and a full life. They are true heroes. They are the ones who will oversee the potential for huge progress in the next 10 years on the cancer diagnosis, treatment and support that we hope to see.

Chris Elmore: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way again—we are in the unusual position of having lots of time, as he has pointed out. I am not sure whether this is in order, but I want to thank him most sincerely for the open way in which he has spoken and responded to Cian’s story, and for the commitments he has given this evening, which will be welcomed across the House and by Cian’s family, particularly the commitment to respond to the all-party parliamentary group and the international commitment on the G7 and the G20. I am enormously grateful, as I know every cancer sufferer and every family member of a cancer sufferer will be. I pay tribute to him, in a rare moment of affection and thanks in this House, which often resembles a bear pit more than anything else, because he clearly has an enormous commitment to the cause that is cancer.

Steve Brine: That is a very nice thing to say. I thank the hon. Gentleman.

In closing, we think that the NHS long-term plan, with cancer right at its heart and with the new north star ambition on early diagnosis and 75% early stage detection, will turbo-charge all that we have already achieved. We are on track to achieve that through the cancer strategy. Last Thursday, in the Westminster Hall debate on breast cancer, I said that I want to see a future where cancer has no future. Maybe I am naive and ambitious, but I want to reiterate that today, because I think that we could achieve that. If we are ever to achieve that goal, I sincerely hope that we can begin by first eradicating all childhood cancers, because many people are relying on us.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I commend the Minister, the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and everyone who has taken part in the debate for showing what this House of Commons can do when it treats a sad but important subject in a serious, hopeful and positive way. Too many people see us as just arguing for the sake of it, so I hope that some will notice that progress can be made in this Chamber. Question put and agreed to.

8.29 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Innovation

1. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps he is taking to introduce innovative technology into the NHS. [907208]

14. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What plans the Government have to improve access to innovative treatments and technologies in the NHS. [907222]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We are bringing a tech revolution to the NHS to improve patient outcomes and reduce waste. Today I am delighted to announce the selection of the first batch of products under the accelerated access collaborative, as well as funding for tech test beds to ensure that more patients get faster access to the most effective innovations.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his answer. Will he expand further on the recent announcement of the wave 2 test beds project and how it could deliver better outcomes for my residents down in Cornwall?

Scott Mann: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer. Will he expand further on the recent announcement of the wave 2 test beds project and how it could deliver better outcomes for my residents down in Cornwall?

Matt Hancock: The tech test beds programme is about ensuring that we have units around the country that will support local collaborations between the NHS, tech companies and academia to harness new technologies right across the land, including—and no doubt—in Cornwall.

Julian Sturdy: The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has so far declined to recommend the new drug Spinraza, despite its ability to transform the lives of patients such as my young constituent Matilda Jamieson, who suffers from type 3 spinal muscular atrophy. As NICE meets today to finalise the guidance, will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will work with the manufacturers, NHS England and NICE to ensure that patients such as Matilda can benefit from that drug?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for making that case so powerfully. We work very closely with NICE, which is rightly the objective decision maker that makes recommendations for Ministers to follow about what drugs should and should not be accessed through the NHS. He makes the case very strongly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This question is about innovative technology in the health service. What is the Secretary of State saying today to scientists? For example, 97% of people from the Francis Crick Institute say that our science and our bioscience are in danger because of Brexit. What is he going to do about technology that is suitable for the health service?

Matt Hancock: The scientists, like me, want a Brexit that is based on a good deal for the UK, and that is what we are seeking to deliver. In any case, we have put more money into the science budget than ever before, so no matter what the outcome of the negotiations, there will be more support for science in Britain.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): One of the innovative technologies is the new production and distribution system for flu jabs for the over-65s. Is the Secretary of State aware that this technology is breaking down? In my constituency and elsewhere, there are doctors and pharmacists who simply cannot get hold of stocks, which leads to potential pressures in hospitals. Will the Secretary of State investigate and take action if necessary?

Matt Hancock: Having a flu jab is incredibly important, and I hope that Members on both sides of the House have taken the opportunity to do so, including the right hon. Gentleman, with whom I enjoyed working for many years. We have a phased roll-out of the flu jab, making sure that we get the best flu jab most appropriately to the people who need it most, and of course we keep that under review.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Digital health tools, including decision-support software, have a great potential to increase the quality, safety and cost-effectiveness of care for patients, and nowhere is that more important than in reducing antimicrobial resistance. Will my right hon. Friend respond to the points that we on the Health and Social Care Committee make in our report about the variation in roll-out, which is wholly unacceptable, and what measures will he take to make sure that it is clear where the responsibility for this lies?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the Select Committee for the report on AMR that was published yesterday. Of course, digital tools such as the one that my hon. Friend mentions are important in making sure that we make the best use of antibiotics and counter antimicrobial resistance as much as possible.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): If we have a “technological revolution”, in the words of the Secretary of State, surely that depends on capital investment, but that has been cut by £1 billion. For example, we have the lowest numbers of CT and MRI scanners on average in the OECD, hospitals are reliant on 1,700 pieces of out-of-date equipment, and
the hospital repair bill now stands at £6 billion. If austerity has ended, can he tell us when this maintenance backlog will be cleared?

Matt Hancock: Unlike with the failed national programme for IT, we are delivering modern technology in the national health service. That is underpinned by a record commitment of £20 billion extra for the NHS over the next five years, accompanied by a long-term plan that will show how we will support the NHS and make sure that it is guaranteed to be there for the long term.

Jonathan Ashworth: But I asked the Secretary of State about capital budgets, not revenue budgets.

Innovative technology can play a role in prevention, but so do public health budgets. With health inequalities widening, infant mortality rising in the most deprived parts of the population, rates of smoking in pregnancy remaining higher than the EU average and child obesity levels getting worse, will the Secretary of State commit, alongside an investment in technology, to reversing the £700 million of cuts to public health, or is the reality that his promises on prevention are entirely hollow?

Matt Hancock: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has it slightly muddled up, because technology does involve capital investment, but it also includes revenue investment to ensure that the service element of any technology can continue to be delivered. Maybe he should have another look at how technology is delivered these days. Alongside the capital budget, we have record spending on the NHS to ensure that it is there for the long term. Of course public health is an important element of that, and there has been £16 billion for public health over this spending review period because it really matters.

Childhood Obesity

2. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps is he taking to reduce rates of childhood obesity. [907209]

8. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps is he taking to reduce rates of childhood obesity. [907216]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): This June we published chapter 2 of the childhood obesity plan, which built on the recognition that breastfeeding can be a means of preventing obesity. Will Ministers engage with the all-party group on infant feeding and inequalities to see what more can be done in England through early breastfeeding to prevent children from becoming obese later on in life?

Steve Brine: Yes, and I am a big supporter of breastfeeding—I have supported it a lot in my constituency, and we engage regularly with the sector. I will be interested in any proposals that the hon. Lady has.

NHS: Value for Money and Efficiency

3. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve value for money and efficiency in the NHS. [907210]

7. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve value for money and efficiency in the NHS. [907215]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): Having committed an additional £20 billion in real terms, the Government are asking the NHS to deliver a long-term plan that includes continued improvements in productivity and efficiency, and we are reinvesting the savings in improved patient care.

Damien Moore: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his drive to recycle more hospital equipment such as zimmer frames, crutches and wheelchairs, but what steps is his...
Department taking to encourage more hospitals such as Southport Hospital in my constituency to run recycling programmes to reduce waste in our NHS?

Stephen Barclay: I am keen to work with my hon. Friend to encourage Southport and other trusts to recycle equipment. I know from my family’s experience that it causes significant frustration when people see hospitals not collecting perfectly good medical equipment that could be recycled. I am keen to work with him and with trusts to ensure that we learn from that.

Alan Mak: Digitising patient records and removing outdated technologies such as fax machines can improve productivity and patient care across the NHS. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to prepare the NHS for the fourth industrial revolution?

Stephen Barclay: I commend my hon. Friend for his excellent report for the Centre for Policy Studies, which highlights the opportunities provided by technology. I was at a Scan4Safety event last night, looking at how barcodes are being used at six trusts, and at how that could be expanded to deliver 4:1 efficiency savings and improve patient care through the safety it offers.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does the Minister believe that the practice of cutting funding to hospitals that miss A&E targets helps to improve the patient experience at those hospitals? Will he agree to meet me to discuss how this issue has affected Leighton hospital, which serves my constituents?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady may have missed our recent announcement of significant additional funding, ahead of winter pressure, to assist hospitals. As the Secretary of State announced, the extra £20.5 billion ahead of winter pressure, to assist hospitals. As the recent announcement of significant additional funding, issues. He draws attention to the wider point of how

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Jack Adcock’s death was a tragedy, but why did the General Medical Council spend £30,000 on getting Dr Hadiza Bawa-Garba struck off, even though she had already faced the consequences of her mistakes in court? Does the Minister think that the GMC needs to sort its act out and that Charlie Massey should resign?

Stephen Barclay: As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, Professor Norman Williams looked at the circumstances of this case and produced a report on it for the Government. As a part of that, we are looking at a number of factors.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is the Minister aware that in terms of value for money and efficiency, the Government of India’s integrated health Ministry has half a million ayurvedic doctors and a quarter of a million homeopathic doctors? At a clinic I visited recently in Karnataka province, four fifths of the patients would have normally gone to see a western doctor were treated by those local doctors. Will he build links with the Indian Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy?

Stephen Barclay: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the longevity and sincerity of his campaigning on these issues. He draws attention to the wider point of how patients presenting with multiple and complex conditions need to be treated in multiple ways, and what he refers to is a part of that wider discussion.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): NHS England is being ripped off to the tune of £230 million a year as the price of some off-patent drugs and non-standard preparations, or specials, have been hiked up hundreds of times, for example to over £1,000 for a bottle of pain-relieving mouthwash. In Scotland, specials remain in-house to keep the price down, but a year and a half on from the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017, why have the Government not used its powers to stop this drug racketeering?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady, very astutely and correctly, identifies the issue, which is how we ensure value for money from specials. Indeed, I commend The Times for highlighting a number of these issues. We are looking at this area. As we commit an extra £20 billion in funding to the NHS, our commitment is to ensure that we derive value for money from that investment. That applies to specials, too.

Dr Whitford: The healthcare market in NHS England is estimated to cost £5 billion to £10 billion a year and involves 2.5 million nursing hours a week being wasted on non-clinical paperwork. Does the Minister not recognise that this is the biggest inefficiency? Will he commit to reversing the disastrous marketisation of NHS England?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the hon. Lady draws attention to my work on driving productivity improvements within the system, which looks at a range of efficiencies such as sending texts and emails, dealing with missed appointments and the use of green energy. We can implement a whole range of initiatives as a part of that agenda.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): As the first port of call for patients with often minor ailments, community pharmacists can really help to improve the efficiency of the NHS by taking pressure off GPs. What plans do the Government have to support and enhance the role of community pharmacists?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the valuable role played by pharmacies. This is part of a wider education campaign within the NHS and increased access to clinicians, such as through 111, is another component of that. We want to ensure that rather than people’s first port of call being a GP, they access the NHS and pharmacies at the appropriate time.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): At the end of the last financial year, trusts owed the Department a staggering £11 billion. NHS providers are reported to say that this is locking some trusts into “a vicious circle of inevitable failure”, and the King’s Fund says that there is no prospect of them ever repaying. Trusts with the biggest debts are forced to pay the highest levels of interest. How can the Minister expect trusts to be efficient when they are paying an interest rate of 6% on debts to his Department?
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*Stephne Barclay:* As it happens, I will be at an event with NHS providers—chief execs—this evening, when I am sure that this will be one of a number of issues that we will discuss. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the very high private finance initiative costs that many trusts face due to contracts signed under the previous Labour Government. That is a real pressure faced by many trusts.

**Global Mental Health Summit**

4. **Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): What the outcomes were of the October 2018 London global ministerial mental health summit.

16. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): What the outcomes were of the October 2018 London global ministerial mental health summit.

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** This month, we hosted the world’s first ever global ministerial mental health summit. Over 60 countries were represented, and they were united in the ambition to achieve equality for mental and physical health. The legacy of the summit will continue, with the baton now passed to the Netherlands, which has committed to host next year.

**Richard Benyon:** At the summit, I hope that the Government were applauded for appointing a Minister for suicide prevention. Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the fact that many people contemplating taking their life end up in A&E or in police stations, and will he look at James’ Place in Liverpool? That non-clinical centre catches young men in particular, who are very often the victims of this problem, and deals with their mental health issues.

**Matt Hancock:** Part of the purpose of having a cross-Government suicide prevention Minister is to bring together all these issues. I pay tribute to the work of James’ Place and its founder, Clare Milford Haven. We are spending £30 million of taxpayers’ money to increase the number of health-based places of safety for people experiencing a crisis, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Adam Afriyie.

**Adam Afriyie:** Question 16, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** No, the question has been grouped. The moment is now; the chance is here—let us hear from the hon. Gentleman.

**Adam Afriyie:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the admonishment, or encouragement—

**Mr Speaker:** Encouragement.

**Adam Afriyie:** Thank you very much.

It strikes me that every person in this Chamber, every one of our constituents and every household across the country will have been affected by the issue of suicide, whether among family, friends or colleagues. The causes of suicide are multi-faceted—there are so many, including mental health—so I welcome the new ministerial responsibility. Will my right hon. Friend clarify precisely what the role will entail in government?

**Matt Hancock:** I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The role will be cross-governmental. It will involve working not only across national Government, convening the policies that need to be pulled together from various Departments’ responses to support people in crisis and to reduce suicide, but with local government, which has responsibilities here.

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): Suicide prevention plans have to be a key element of any mental health strategy, yet the Government are not monitoring the effectiveness of those plans or ensuring that they are fully funded. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that the plans that are put in place are effective and that local authorities have sufficient funds to implement them properly?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the need to ensure that funding for mental health services has parity with that for physical health services. Getting there is the work of a generation. We did not even measure access to mental health services until this Government brought that in, and we are working towards parity.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Secretary of State boasted to the global ministerial mental health summit about the Government’s plans to recruit 21,000 more staff to the mental health workforce by 2021, but he did not tell the summit that by the end of May this year, nearly 25,000 mental health staff—one in eight of the workforce—had left the NHS and that fewer than 1,000 extra staff had been recruited by March, equating to just 0.5% of his target. Does he really think that he is in a position to lecture the rest of the world?

**Matt Hancock:** I welcome the hon. Lady’s commitment to this area. Clearly it is very important to have the workforce in place. As she said, we are making progress, but we still have more to do. As far as the international approach is concerned, the response to the summit was that many countries came together, because collectively we all face the same sorts of challenges. I am in absolutely no doubt that the leadership shown by some countries, including the UK, is warmly welcomed.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The links between poor mental health, suicide and gambling addiction have been made clear to the Health and Social Care Committee. In that regard, will the Secretary of State make it clear to the Treasury that many across the House want to make sure that action on fixed odds betting terminals is taken forward so that we can have good results in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend knows my personal strength of feeling about tackling the scourge of fixed odds betting terminals. The links between gambling addiction and mental health issues—and indeed, directly to suicide—are clear in the evidence, and we must address them.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My constituent David contacted me after his 18-year-old son became severely mentally unwell and needed emergency
treatment. His son spent four days in A&E at the local hospital because no in-patient beds were available. This is not a one-off case: on a daily basis, mentally unwell people are being failed by our health service. When will the Secretary of State take meaningful action to fund mental health services properly and stop this scandal?

Matt Hancock: I am glad that, like me, the hon. Lady cares so much about getting this right. The long-term plan, which we are writing with the NHS, for how we will spend the £20 billion funding increase is where we can get these details right. Access to mental health services was not even measured before. The first step was to put the measurement in place, and now we can act on that measurement with the huge increase in funding coming to the NHS.

Radiotherapy

5. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): If he will ensure that NHS England enables NHS trusts to provide advanced radiotherapy treatment. [

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Yes, we are fully committed to ensuring that the most innovative cancer treatments are available to patients on the NHS. Since 2016, the radiotherapy modernisation programme has seen £130 million of new investment to ensure that all new equipment is capable of delivering advanced radiotherapy.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that reply. May I point out how effective advanced radiotherapy is against many cancers affecting the soft tissue? I must declare an interest as a beneficiary of the treatment myself. The latest NHS research shows that treating prostate cancer with 20 treatments of advanced radiotherapy is far better for patient outcomes and would save the NHS more than £20 million a year, but the current tariffs system disincentives trusts from saving this money, as their income is based on the number of treatments. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the all-party group on radiotherapy to discuss how we might address this anomaly and improve treatments?

Steve Brine: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman in his place and looking so well—I am glad we looked after him well. He is absolutely right that access to advanced radiotherapy treatments is critical, as is getting them against the key standard. I would be very pleased to meet his all-party group and discuss its manifesto for radiotherapy.

Mr Speaker: I call Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was standing. She has changed her mind. All right, never mind. We can always have another go later.

A&E: West Midlands

6. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the planned closure of Telford Hospital’s A&E department on other A&E departments in the west midlands.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): The planned temporary overnight closure of the Princess Royal Hospital’s A&E in Telford is necessary to ensure that patients continue to receive safe care. The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust is working closely with colleagues in neighbouring provider trusts and the ambulance service to develop plans for key clinical pathways to minimise the impact.

Emma Reynolds: The proposed closure of Telford A&E would pile even more pressure on New Cross Hospital in my constituency. If the Government will not step in to stop the closure, as it sounds is the case from the Minister’s answer, will they give New Cross the resources it needs to recruit upfront the nurses, doctors and other staff they need so that patients do not have to suffer longer delays?

Stephen Barclay: The current modelling suggests that about 11 ambulances will be diverted from the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust between the hours of 10 pm and 8 am during closure. Of the patients who go to Wolverhampton, any admitted as in-patients will return to Shrewsbury and Telford and any who are discharged will be discharged from Wolverhampton.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The chief executive of Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust says that the closure at Telford is the result of bad planning and could have been prevented. Does the Minister agree it is wholly unacceptable that my constituents’ safety should be put at risk by a preventable closure that is the result of bad planning by management, and will he do all he can to ensure that the hospital management have the help they need to properly run our hospital and properly plan for the needs of our community?

Stephen Barclay: First, may I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned assiduously on behalf of her constituents? She has lobbied me and the Secretary of State and made her case very powerfully to NHS leaders. There has been progress: three additional consultants have been hired and attempts made to recruit middle-ranking doctors to the trust, including from neighbouring trusts. We are making a significant capital investment in the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, and these changes must be seen in the light of that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no; Yorkshire is the most marvellous place, but it is a considerable distance from the narrow ambit of the question, from which the Minister did not stray. The ingenuity of those Members will be served later in our proceedings.

Health and Social Care Hubs


[907214]
The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Health and social care hubs are a great example of health and care systems coming together through sustainability and transformation partnerships and integrated care systems to transform services in local areas. The NHS long-term plan will set out how we will enable and encourage better integration.

Luke Pollard: The Minister will know that Plymouth is leading the way in developing health and social care wellbeing hubs. She will also know that we have bid for £15 million of funding to create more hubs across the city, especially in our city centre, to bring together NHS dentistry and dental schools, sexual and mental health support, social care and new forms of general practice. Will she do all that she can to look positively on that bid, so that we can help to improve our health outcomes?

Caroline Dinenage: I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue. Plymouth is indeed leading the way in creating hubs and showing how incredibly valuable they are in bringing together all the relevant services in one place, not only to tackle people’s current healthcare needs but to play a vital role in prevention.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Health and social care hubs provide a real opportunity to ensure that patients are cared for in the right place, and it is vital for that to be extended to those who need palliative care. Can the Minister confirm that the NHS 10-year plan will adequately address the need for equal and appropriate access to palliative care across the country?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention this. Palliative care is crucial to the experience not only of patients but of their families and carers. He will be interested to know that we have a new indicator from 2018-19 to measure the proportion of people who have had three or more emergency admissions in their last 90 days of life, which will help us to assess how people can be better supported in the community, and to do that better.

Cancer: Early Diagnosis

10. Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the rate of early diagnosis of cancer.

11. Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the rate of early diagnosis of cancer.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Britain is world leading at treating cancer when it is discovered, but we do not diagnose it early enough, so we will radically overhaul our screening programmes, roll out rapid diagnostic centres for people with early symptoms, and expand mobile lung screening units. Our ambition is to ensure that three quarters of cancers are diagnosed at stage 1 or 2 by 2028, up from half today.

Sir David Evennett: May I first highlight the excellent Guy’s Cancer Centre at Queen Mary’s hospital in Sidcup, a state-of-the-art facility which offers local cancer patients treatment closer to home? Secondly, can my right hon. Friend provide any detail on how the NHS long-term plan will improve cancer services?

Matt Hancock: Yes. Focusing on early diagnosis will help to save lives. Indeed, the cancer survival rates have never been higher than they are now. About 7,000 people who are alive today would not have been had mortality rates stayed the same as they were in 2010. However, we want to use the most cutting-edge technologies in order to save more lives.

Kwasi Kwarteng: In respect of early screening, how does my right hon. Friend expect the measures that he has introduced to move the service forward in the way that we want to see?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely central to this is ensuring that we address cancer at the earliest possible opportunity. The earlier the diagnosis is made, the greater is the likelihood of survival, so we want to see more cancers diagnosed earlier across the board.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Social care hubs could be part of the way forward for social care, but, in response to a recent survey of care providers in my constituency, 71% said that despite the best efforts of staff the quality of care had greatly diminished because of years of chronic underfunding. Does the Minister agree that we need a systemic change in social care funding, given that the extra money provided so far is a drop in the ocean and does not address levels of need?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right. We know that the adult social care system is under pressure, which is why we are setting out a more sustainable future in the Green Paper which will be published later this year. It is, however, important to point out that more than 83% of adult social care providers are rated good or outstanding, and that, thanks to a range of Government actions, County Durham has received an additional £37 million for adult social care in 2018-19 and was allocated £2,822,376 in the recent winter funding announcement.
the country has linear accelerators that are enabled to provide the advanced SABR, or stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy, technology, but Government—NHS England—contracts mean that of the 52 centres in England no more than 20 are contracted to actually use this technology. That means that either patients are not receiving the highest quality life-saving standard of treatment that they could be or that trusts are providing it anyway but are not being paid and valuable data on mistreatment are being completely lost. Will the right hon. Gentleman order NHS England to stop this recklessness, and frankly lethal, nonsense and agree to every—

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Order. The thrust of the question is entirely clear. I was going to offer the hon. Gentleman an Adjournment debate on the subject until I realised that he had in fact just conducted it.

Matt Hancock: And also, Mr Speaker, the hon. Gentleman’s all-party group is meeting my Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), on this very matter. Since 2016 we have put £130 million of funding in to try to resolve the issue that the hon. Gentleman talks about: to make sure that all new equipment is capable of delivering advanced radiotherapy. Work on this is ongoing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: In calling the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) I promise to make no reference to the result of the match last night between Arsenal and Leicester City.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, you had a broader smile on your face this morning than my friend the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and I. We still support Leicester and hope we will pay you back some day.

An important aspect of diagnosing cancer is to find the drugs that address it. What has been done to ensure the partnerships between universities and the NHS can continue, so that they can find new drugs and therefore address cancers at a very early stage?

Matt Hancock: There are deepening relationships between universities and the NHS right across the country, especially in this field of the combination of diagnosis and early treatment. Some of the most advanced technology and research in the world is happening in universities in the UK in order to save lives, which is such an important issue here.

Leaving the EU: Access to Medicines

12. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on access to new medicines of the UK leaving the EU.

Matt Hancock: The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We will continue to have access to new medicines through the deal we expect to negotiate with the EU. In the unlikely event of no deal, we will directly recognise batch testing of medicines done in the EU. We are currently consulting on the approach to licensing medicines in a no-deal scenario, but I am clear that patients should not be disadvantaged and should continue to have timely access to new medicines.

Alan Brown: The reality is that Brexit uncertainty about future medicine approvals and unresolved issues with the European Medicines Agency have caused research firm Recardio to suspend UK recruitment to a drug trial, posing a risk to its business and interrupting the research. As the EMA has no associate membership for third countries, how does the Secretary of State plan to avoid the UK being left out of future clinical trials despite his bluster?

Matt Hancock: Not only does the UK bring a huge amount to the table in terms of research, but we fully intend to make sure that we have a robust and seamless system in place. A consultation is out at the moment and we will respond to it very shortly.

Martyn Day: The Government have stated that the new EU clinical trials regulations will not be in place before March, but have committed to aligning with it where possible. What progress has been made regarding data sharing to ensure that clinical trials continue and pharmaceutical and research firms do not leave the UK after Brexit?

Matt Hancock: As part of the EU deal we are negotiating, the relationship with the EMA will be extremely close, so I am sure that that will be a part of our agreement.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Health Secretary confirm that since the referendum the number of EU nationals working in our NHS has actually risen by 4,000, and that regardless of the state of the negotiations their rights will be protected and they will continue to be able to work in the NHS after we leave?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, the number of EU nationals working in the NHS has now risen by more than 4,000 since the referendum, and we welcome them all.

Orkambi

13. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent progress has been made in negotiations between NHS England and Vertex Pharmaceuticals on making Orkambi available on the NHS for people diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Nigel Adams): It was disappointing that in July and August, Vertex, the manufacturer of Orkambi, rejected the final offer made by NHS England, as well as rejecting the opportunity for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—NICE—to appraise its new medicines, as is required for all companies seeking routine NHS funding for their products. Vertex must
re-engage with NICE and NHS England, and I am encouraged that it attended a meeting with NICE on 4 October to discuss next steps.

Mr Hepburn: As the Minister knows, Orkambi is available for cystic fibrosis sufferers in Ireland, Greece, Denmark and a host of other countries around the world, so when will it be available for cystic fibrosis sufferers in this country?

Nigel Adams: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in this subject and that he campaigns assiduously on behalf of his constituents in this regard. He is right to suggest that Ministers are keeping a very close eye on these negotiations, and we urge Vertex to consider NHS England’s fair and final offer. However, it is absolutely right that we have a system—introduced by the Labour party—in which experts, not politicians, determine the fair price for a drug, based on robust evidence.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I almost thought you had forgotten about me, Mr Speaker.

Last month, speaking on this very subject, the Secretary of State said that he would not let pharmaceutical companies hold the NHS to ransom, but the 5,200 patients who could benefit from Orkambi are left suffering while this war of words continues. What does the Secretary of State have to say, through his Minister, to those patients who are awaiting a resolution to this stalemate?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a correct point, and we are very keen that patients receive this drug. I understand her ire, but perhaps it should be directed at Vertex, the manufacturer. The offer of £500 million over five years for the size of the eligible population is the largest-ever commitment of its kind in the 70-year history of the NHS, and it would guarantee immediate and expanded access to Orkambi and to other drugs.

Preventive Care

15. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve preventive care in the NHS.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Our NHS offers a range of world-leading preventive care services, but we can go further and faster. The Secretary of State has named prevention as one of his top three priorities, signalling a renewed focus on public health, community and mental health services.

James Cleverly: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will know, because I have spoken about this to the Secretary of State’s team, about the pressures on my constituency, and particularly on the Church Lane GP surgery. Specifically on preventive services, wearable tech, health tech and medical tech provide an opportunity to keep people healthier for longer, and can provide early digital diagnosis that can relieve pressure on medical services. What more can be done to pursue this way of relieving pressure on the health service?

Caroline Dinenage: I completely agree that technology can really help in this way. I recently visited Hampshire County Council, which is using a range of gadgets including a really simple one involving a light bulb that comes on when someone gets out of bed in the night to go for a pee. That is ingenious, and it is helping to prevent avoidable falls.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My constituent Holly Alliston has contacted me about the epipens that her two-year-old son, who has a severe nut allergy, relies on. There is a national shortage of them, and the Northfield Pharmacy has been emailed by NHS England to say that the situation is critical. What is the Minister doing about this? We hear about the possibility of troops having to distribute stockpiled medicines when we leave the EU, but this is hitting us now.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this matter. We are working closely with all the manufacturers of adrenaline auto-injectors to improve the supply situation as quickly as possible.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): One in 10 mums gets post-natal depression, and we know that early identification is key to preventing it from becoming more serious. May I urge the Minister to look at the National Childbirth Trust’s campaign to ensure that all mums—as well as all babies—get a six-week check?

Caroline Dinenage: We are really supportive of the Hidden Half campaign, run by the NCT—my colleague the Minister met the trust last week. We must ensure that we are supportive of new mothers’ health needs.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What improvements have emerged in relation to prostate cancer treatments?

Caroline Dinenage: I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised that. Clearly, early screening is fundamental and one of the key pillars of what we want to focus on with cancers. Prostate cancer affects so many gentlemen up and down the country, and we know that that early detection is the difference between life and death.

Antimicrobial Resistance

17. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle antimicrobial resistance and inappropriate use of antibiotics; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): We continue to make good progress against our 2013 AMR strategy ambitions. According to the latest figures, since 2013, antibiotic prescriptions dispensed by GPs have decreased by 13%, and sales of antibiotics for use in food-producing animals dropped by 27%.

Michael Fabricant: That is encouraging to hear because antimicrobial resistance is caused by the excessive and inappropriate use of antibiotics. Given that we have a Matt Hancock app, should not we have a similar app to try to educate people about when it is appropriate and not appropriate to use antibiotics?
Steve Brine: I will look at what can be added to the Matt Hancock app—there is always room for more.

As luck would have it, today Public Health England has launched its latest “Keep Antibiotics Working” national public awareness campaign, which aims to educate the public about the risks of AMR and urges them always to take the advice of their healthcare professionals on antibiotics and, when necessary, to challenge them.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): AMR poses a grave threat to health. Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, told our Health and Social Care Committee inquiry that if action is not taken to address this “growing threat, modern medicine will be lost.”

Will the Secretary of State and Ministers heed that warning and ensure that AMR is prioritised?

Steve Brine: Absolutely. The UK is a global leader in tackling AMR and we are currently working on the refresh of our strategy. I was at the G20 earlier this month, where Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer for England, showed world leadership and led an exercise with world leaders to strengthen understanding by showing how developed countries would tackle an outbreak.

Public Health Funding

18. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent representations has he received on the potential merits of increasing public health funding to local authorities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): This Government have a strong track record on public health. Local authorities in England are supported by ring-fenced public health grants of more than £16 billion over the current spending review period. Decisions on future funding are, of course, for the next spending review.

Diana Johnson: Substance misuse services are due to be slashed by £34 million owing to cuts imposed by central Government. In Hull, and I am sure in many other parts of the country, there is a growing blight on our streets caused by Spice and other substances. How is it in any way helpful to communities, frontline police or the NHS for the Government to cut services that help people deal with their addictions?

Steve Brine: As I said, we are spending £16 billion of our constituents’ money during this spending review period on public health grants. Decisions about where we go in future are of course not a matter for me but for the Chancellor in the spending review.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): How many health visitors have been lost since 2015? How will the Minister ensure that important investments are made at the start of life to reduce health inequalities?

Steve Brine: As I suspect the hon. Gentleman knows, I do not have that figure at my fingertips, but I will provide it to him. Health visitors are a critical part of the puzzle, and local authorities are well aware of that, as are Ministers.

Topical Questions

T1. [907233] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The Department is working with the NHS to ensure that the £20 billion of extra taxpayers’ money is well spent: supporting social care, backing the workforce, using the best modern technology and strengthening prevention. On that note, I can tell the House that we now have a record number of GPs in training: 3,473—10% up on last year.

Huw Merriman: I thank the Secretary of State for so promptly accepting our invitation to visit us in East Sussex in January. He will be warmly welcomed. With that season in mind, what assessment has he made of the NHS’s resilience with winter approaching?

Matt Hancock: Of course winter always challenges the NHS, and this year will be no different. We have put in extra funding, including more capital funding, to ensure that we get the best possible flow through A&E and to ensure there is further funding for social care so that people who do not need to be in hospital can leave hospital.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Last week, The Times reported that a young autistic woman with severe learning disabilities and an IQ of 52 was sexually exploited for months after her care provider had a court accept a plan for her to have sexual relations with men at her home. It is unacceptable that the agency charged with the care of this young woman decided that unsupervised contact with men for sex was in her best interest, yet the Government would give all such care providers a role in assessing the mental capacity of the people for whom they care. Will the Secretary of State urgently investigate this case? Given that the case illustrates the conflict of interest that arises from involving care providers in mental capacity assessments, will he pause the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill to allow time to make it fit for purpose?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this incredibly concerning case. Unfortunately, because the case is ongoing and due to be heard before the High Court very shortly, we are unable to discuss the specifics of the case, but we are incredibly concerned by what it suggests. We have made it clear in statutory guidance to support the implementation of the Care Act 2014 that we expect local authorities to ensure that the services they commission are safe, effective and high quality. Once this case has gone through the High Court, we will look to take further action.

T2. [907234] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A constituent has just written to me saying that his diabetic care has been moved from John Coupland...
Matt Hancock: Yes, of course I will make sure the appropriate action is taken in this case. It is a sensitive matter, and I look forward to discussing it with the hon. Lady.

T4. [907236] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The NHS diabetes prevention programme, which was one of the first of its kind, has helped many people since 2016. As someone who has been diagnosed as a type 2 diabetic since that point, it is of particular interest to me. Will the Minister assure me that when the long-term NHS plan is published, we will be even more ambitious?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): We certainly will. I do not wish to pre-empt what the long-term plan will say, but it is an excellent opportunity for us to look at how the NHS can best support people who have or are at risk of developing diabetes, and that includes transformation funding beyond next spring and how technology can be used to help people better manage that long-term condition.

T10. [907242] Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister provide an update on the revised capital bid by Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to provide Halton General Hospital with a secure future?

Stephen Barclay: I am not aware of the specific details of that, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it if he has particular concerns he wishes to raise.

T5. [907237] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Spina bifida is one of the most prevalent causes of infant mortality and disability, and a campaign has been running for quite a long time to try to fortify flour to prevent it. Successive Governments have ducked the issue, so will we now please seize it?

Steve Brine: We are continuing to review the advice from our expert advisory groups on safe levels of folate intake, but, continuing our tradition of announcing things to the House first, I want to inform the House today that we are going to issue a public consultation, as of now, on adding folic acid to flour.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The service from the East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust has been a considerable disappointment for many of my constituents in recent months. When I met them about the service, they told me that on a huge number of occasions they have ambulances sat waiting outside accident and emergency departments, rather than getting to the next call. What more can the Government do to make sure we get these A&Es cleared?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to improve those handovers. We have improvement programmes in place at 11 hospital sites in the east midlands, alongside which we are making a £4.9 million investment in 37 new ambulances. Part of this is also about the length of stay and addressing the pathway.

T9. [907241] Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome Baroness Cumberlege’s ongoing review of the impact of the use of Primodos pregnancy tests, but for the families affected to have confidence in this review they must be given sufficient time to give evidence. Will the Health Secretary ensure that that happens?
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The recent report from the Royal College of Physicians, “Hiding in plain sight: Treating tobacco dependency in the NHS”, made clear the cost savings and health benefits there would be if doctors identified smokers and referred them to smoking cessation services, so will next month’s plan include that, particularly for pregnant women and mental health patients?

Steve Brine: As my hon. Friend, the chair of the all-party group on smoking and health, knows, those groups are key to delivering our tobacco control plan. We are not complacent at all; the delivery plan that was published in June sets out the actions that different agencies will take to deliver the five-year plan, and that absolutely includes mentor cessation services.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I very much welcome news of the consultation on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid, but are the Government consulting on whether it should happen or on how it should happen?

Steve Brine: We will be taking evidence, including from the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment, which is meeting as we speak, to look at the safe upper limit of folate. I am particularly keen to get that right, but I am convinced that the evidence shows overwhelmingly that this is something we should be doing.

T6. [907239] Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What is it, precisely, about the NHS’s management and leadership that means it seems to be unable to achieve consistent excellence in its hospitals, such as happens at the Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust? Why is it so hard for lessons learned to be better disseminated?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend identifies a critical factor in improving the future of the NHS, which is to have stronger leadership at all levels, to be able to support innovation and to find out the best that is happening elsewhere and bring it to trusts. I know he has a particular interest in that, and I look forward to working with him on it.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders mean permanent brain damage. In the United States, studies show that one in 20 children are affected. So when will this Government carry out their own prevalence study, so that we can confirm the extent of this entirely preventable disability in the UK?

Steve Brine: Public Health England collects some data on foetal alcohol syndrome, but we recognise that the data do not reflect the range of FASD. These disorders are difficult to diagnose, which is why we are engaging experts and those affected to explore what more could be done to improve our understanding.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the extra £5 million for East Midlands ambulance service and for the £4.5 million extra for Nottingham University Hospitals Trust, which will mean at least 150 more beds this winter, all of which will help with winter planning, but does he agree that it behaves us all to play our own part in keeping fit and healthy and to use the NHS services responsibly?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point, which is that, while we drive to ensure that the NHS is prepared as possible for this winter, it is incumbent on everybody to exercise their judgment, yes, to access the NHS where it is needed and important, but also to make sure that they bear a personal responsibility, too.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals Trust is proposing to close our midwife-led maternity unit, telling me that, while it is safe, unless it has 500 births a year, it is not value for money. Is that a new national standard for midwifery units, because if so it would close 90% of free-standing units? Will a Minister meet me on this matter, because it is unfair on local parents, and, frankly, we are sick and tired of losing services from our towns?

Stephen Barclay: I am happy to meet the right hon. Lady and to discuss the matter further.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am extremely concerned about the case of Logan, a young boy in my constituency who requires round-the-clock care and the handling of his case by Corby clinical commissioning group. I have written to the Minister raising concerns about this case, but is he willing to meet me and Logan’s parents, Darren and Wendy, to talk about how this could perhaps be resolved and to apply any pressure that he can, because, as a family, they should be making memories at the moment, not battling local NHS bureaucracy?

Steve Brine: Yes.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it true that the Secretary of State is now so worried about the supply of vital medicines in the event of a no deal or a hard Brexit that he has asked the pharmaceutical industry to extend the period of stockpiling from six weeks to 20 weeks?

Matt Hancock: No, that is not true. We are working very closely with the pharmaceutical industry to make sure that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, which I regard as unlikely, we mitigate as much as possible the impact on the supply of medicines and that the supply of medicines can be unhindered.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my hon. Friend, the Minister with responsibility for antimicrobial resistance, consider a 10% levy on antibiotics? If such a levy were applied globally, it would raise £3 billion a year, which is the amount specified in the O’Neill review to fund research into this area properly.

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for his consistent work in this area. Stimulating the pipeline for new antimicrobials and alternative treatments is a complex matter. I can assure him that we continue to work with our international partners—I mentioned the G20 earlier—and that absolutely involves market entry awards, which, as he knows, is a global problem that requires a similar solution.
Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Every week in this country, two children are born with spina bifida or anencephaly, and I am delighted that the Minister has just announced the consultation on the fortification of flour, which could stop 70% of those birth defects. Can he tell the House how quickly he hopes to bring about the conclusion of the consultation?

Steve Brine: Let me just pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work that he has done, bringing this matter to the fore and really pushing it forward. The answer is as soon as possible. I also want to make sure that I can involve the other agencies. Public Health England will be very important in this, because, of course, not every woman eats bread and therefore takes the flour supplement.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I am sure that the Minister is aware that October is breast cancer awareness month. I welcome the ambition that the Prime Minister set out at the party conference for 75% early-stage diagnosis. There is some concern that, as breast cancer is already above that, there is no ambition left for it to do even better. Can he assure me and the breast cancer community that that is not the case?

Steve Brine: That is certainly not the case. We had a very good debate on breast cancer last week. It is BCAM still this month for another week. The 75% was a target, a new national ambition. It most certainly is not the limit of our ambition.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Will the Government write off the debts of Yorkshire hospitals so that extra money invested can go into patient care?

Stephen Barclay: As the Secretary of State set out, we are making a significant funding commitment to the NHS—the extra £20 billion—but that is not conditional on writing off debt.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister please provide an update to the House on work to ensure that we train more GPs for England, particularly for west Oxfordshire?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend will have heard that we have record numbers of GPs in training—10% up on last year. I want to see more GPs—5,000 more across the country—and, no doubt, some of those in west Oxfordshire.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I have a constituent who has Turner syndrome, a female-only genetic disorder that affects one in every 2,000 baby girls. Owing to this, she has to take several medications every day of her life, and this is mounting up as she gets older. She works so she is not on any benefits and has to pay for her medications herself. Will the Minister consider exempting those who suffer from lifelong conditions such as Turner syndrome from paying for their prescriptions? Surely, it cannot be right that people in England should be treated differently from those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where such prescription charges have been abolished.

Steve Brine: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss her constituent’s case.
because everybody who needs one should get one. The arrival of the flu jab medicine is phased, because we have to ensure that we get the right flu jabs. If the hon. Gentleman could carry on promoting flu jabs for the elderly, I would be delighted.

Mr Speaker: Is the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) satisfied?

Mr Skinner: No.

Mr Speaker: Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman has had his say, and I feel sure that he will say it again as often as is necessary.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Will the Minister tell me whether the withdrawal of funding for the Healthy Futures programme in the north-west and Public Health Action in the south-west is likely to help or hinder us meeting the smoking cessation targets in the tobacco control programme?

Steve Brine: This comes back to the matter of public health budgets—£16 billion during the current spending review period, with local authorities best placed to make local decisions on what is needed in their local area. That is the same in the right hon. Gentleman’s area as it is in mine.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Last month, the Mayor of Greater Manchester adopted the five recommendations of my report, “Living Well and Dying Well”, which seeks to include hospice care provision more formally in our NHS and social care planning. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of our hospices to see how we might best make use of these brilliant community health assets?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter. Hospices provide an incredible level of care right across the UK, and we cannot do enough to support them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There were 30 topical questions. Although there was scope for many more, I am afraid that we have to stop now. Thank you, colleagues.
Abortion

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

12.39 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to abortion in England and Wales, and Northern Ireland; to remove criminal liability in respect of abortion performed with the consent of the pregnant woman up to the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy; to repeal sections 59 and 60 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861; to create offences of termination of a pregnancy after its twenty-fourth week and non-consensual termination of a pregnancy; to amend the law relating to conscientious objection to participation in abortion treatment; and for connected purposes.

I thank Gordon Nardell QC and Professor Sally Sheldon for drafting the Bill. It is supported by the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, Amnesty International, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, the Family Planning Association, Marie Stopes International, the End Violence against Women Coalition, Women’s Aid and the TUC.

Abortion in our country is underpinned by the oldest legal framework for any healthcare treatment, with the harshest criminal sentences in the developed world for women having an illegal abortion. Poland, the USA, Canada and parts of Australia do not criminalise women. The law needs to be updated to deal with the advances in women’s healthcare and sex and relationships education, and with the role of the internet—all of which have occurred alongside the changing attitudes in society.

Our current abortion laws date back to the Offences Against the Person Act 1861—back to a time when Queen Victoria was on the throne and women were still decades away from getting the right to vote. Under the 1861 Act, any woman procuring her own miscarriage and anyone assisting her can go to prison for life. In 1967, Parliament voted for the Abortion Act, which gave a route for women in England and Wales to access abortion legally, by setting out specific exemptions and conditions, including the need for signatures from two doctors agreeing that, for example, a termination is necessary to prevent permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman. Women’s lives have been saved in their thousands by David Steel’s 1967 Act, which meant that women no longer had to seek out unsafe, unregulated backstreet abortionists.

So, what are the facts about abortion today? One in three women will have an abortion in their lifetime. These days, 80% of abortions take place in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and are medically induced by taking tablets, not by surgical procedures. It is the only medical procedure that requires the agreement of two doctors. In 2007, the Science and Technology Committee found no evidence that this requirement “serves to safeguard women or doctors”.

The 1967 Act has never applied to Northern Ireland, and the chilling effect of the 1861 Act means that abortion hardly ever takes places in Northern Ireland. It is one of the harshest abortion regimes in the world, with no abortion available in cases of rape, incest or fatal foetal abnormality. This is what a woman from Northern Ireland says:

“I spent Christmas Day in casualty with my two children. My husband had beaten me to a pulp... He had repeatedly raped me... Six weeks later I discovered I was pregnant, I could not continue with the pregnancy. Knowing my husband would carry out his threats to kill me if he found out, I went to my GP who told me abortion was illegal in Northern Ireland and refused to help.”

Or let us consider Denise’s story. She was told midway through her pregnancy that her baby had Edwards syndrome and would not survive. Very ill and unable to travel, Denise was forced to continue with her pregnancy because she lived in Northern Ireland. She was repeatedly asked about her baby and that, she said, left her feeling tortured. She said:

“Every minute, every second of the day—you have to live with the knowledge that the child inside you is going to die.”

Or imagine being 18-year-old Emma, who found out at 20 weeks that her baby had anencephaly and would not survive. She could not face traveling to England for an abortion because she wanted to be surrounded by her loving family. She had to continue the pregnancy to term because she lived in Northern Ireland, and she was eventually induced to give birth to her stillborn daughter.

Then there was the mother who found out that her 15-year-old daughter was pregnant and that her abusive partner has threatened to “kick the baby out and stab it if it is born.”

Feeling that she had no other option, she bought her daughter abortion tablets online. Seeking support for her daughter from their family doctor concerning the abusive relationship—not the abortion—she now faces a potential prison sentence for trying to help her daughter access medical care denied to her by their Government.

Then there is the heartbreaking account this week on Twitter from a Northern Ireland woman who has been live-tweeting at @ratherbehome her experience of having to travel to England for an abortion. She says this:

“I should be at home, in the privacy of my own home. Instead I’m trying to discreetly bleed in a shitty hotel. There’s no dignity. There’s no privacy.”

These are real-life examples of what women in Northern Ireland face under the current abortion law. Consider for a moment the morality of laws that mean that women in Northern Ireland seeking an abortion after being impregnated through a sexual crime, rape or incest, could face a heavier criminal punishment than the perpetrators—the real criminals.

This June, the Supreme Court found that Northern Ireland’s current abortion laws breach women’s human rights in Northern Ireland. In February 2018, the United Nations found that thousands of women and girls in Northern Ireland are subject to grave and systematic violations of their rights, being compelled either to travel outside Northern Ireland for a legal abortion or to carry their pregnancy to term. With the Northern Ireland Assembly not sitting since January 2017, UK politicians can no longer look away while vulnerable women in Northern Ireland, often suffering in desperate circumstances, have their human rights breached. As Hillary Clinton said:

“Human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights”.

Let there be no hard borders in the Irish sea over human rights.
Polling research released on 10 October 2018 by Amnesty International shows that 65% of people in Northern Ireland believe that “having an abortion should not be a crime”, while 66% supported the view that in the absence of devolved government, “Westminster should legislate to reform the law”.

If Westminster does decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland, it will then be for the Northern Ireland Assembly to decide what abortion provision should look like there.

Meanwhile, even in England and Wales, a woman using abortion tablets bought online is committing a criminal offence punishable by life imprisonment—and it is often the most vulnerable women, finding it difficult to access termination services, who turn to the internet. Women on Web, a doctor-led online medical service, says that 16% of women cite domestic or “honour” violence, and 8% intimate partner violence, as reasons to seek tablets online. Whether in Birmingham, Belfast or Bangor, women need a modern, supportive, humane, properly regulated medical regime that encourages them to come forward for the best professional advice and treatment, not drives them, isolated and scared, into the unregulated internet pills market.

Therefore, my Bill ensures that up to 24 weeks’ foetal gestation, women and clinicians would no longer be subject to the criminal law for consensual abortion. The 24-week time limit remains, and decriminalisation does not mean the deregulation of abortion: safeguards stay in place. My aim is for effective regulation fit for purpose in the 21st century. The existing body of law and professional standards governing medical procedures would stay. It would remain a crime to offer abortion services without being registered to do so, while anyone supplying medication without a legal prescription would breach the Human Medicines Regulations 2012. Clinics would continue to be registered and subject to Care Quality Commission oversight.

Very importantly, my Bill would also strengthen protection for women and target the criminal law on the real criminals. Anyone—an abusive partner, for example—who ends a pregnancy against a woman’s wishes through violence, or by administering abortion pills without the woman’s knowledge, would be subject to a life sentence. My Bill also protects doctors and nurses who conscientiously object to abortion, extending this as a statutory right to Northern Ireland.

It is time to remove Victorian, misogynistic stigma from our abortion laws. My aim is simple—women able to choose what happens to their own bodies: confident, not criminalised, supported, not stigmatised; women able to access professional advice and medical care that is regulated effectively; and an Act of Parliament that is fit for now, not for 51 years ago, and certainly not for 157 years ago.

12.49 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Whatever Members’ differing views on abortion, if we respect devolution, we should vote against this motion. It proposes far-reaching changes in abortion law, not only for England and Wales but for Northern Ireland, where abortion has been respected as a devolved matter since 1921. Indeed, it would set a dangerous constitutional precedent of interference.

It is not only unconstitutional. It is untimely, at such a sensitive time in relations between the Westminster Government and the Northern Ireland Administration. It would completely undermine the substance and spirit of the Good Friday agreement, and it is unwanted. Northern Ireland is the most recent part of the UK to vote on abortion law, in 2016, and it voted by a clear majority to retain its law as it stands. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) quoted statistics in her support, but let us hear what the people of Northern Ireland said just last week when asked. Some 66% of women and 70% of 18 to 30-year-olds there said that Westminster should not dictate this change to them.

If, however, the Province in time decides to change its law, that is for them, not for us here as MPs in Westminster to decide. Colleagues will no doubt recall the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland saying in the House recently:

“The Government believe that the question of any future reform in Northern Ireland must be debated and decided by the people of Northern Ireland and their locally elected, and therefore accountable, politicians.”—[Official Report, 5 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 220.]

That was specifically in respect of abortion. She has also said that

“it would not be right for the UK Government to undermine the devolution settlement by trying to force on the people of Northern Ireland something that we in Westminster think is right”.—[Official Report, 9 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 661.]

Those sentiments were reinforced by the Prime Minister, when she said:

“Our focus is restoring a democratically accountable devolved government in Northern Ireland”.

In that clear respect, this motion is contrary to Government policy and should be voted down.

Can we in all conscience vote on the one hand tomorrow on a Bill to

“Facilitate the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland”, as its long title commences, respecting the authority of that Executive to make decisions on such issues as roads and infrastructure, and then on the other hand today seek to deny Northern Ireland that authority on a matter of such fundamental social significance as abortion? We cannot, and we must not.

Whatever the views of Members across the House on abortion, they should hear what a number of Northern Irish women who wrote to me said:

“Changing the law in Northern Ireland at this sensitive political moment on this sensitive political issue is bad for devolution everywhere.”

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) has said from the Scottish National party Benches:

“The decisions of devolved Administrations are taken for reasons that people in those devolved nations understand from their point of view”—[Official Report, 5 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 228.]

Or, as Ruth Davidson, who is in favour of changing the law on this issue, more bluntly puts it:
“as someone who operates in a devolved administration, I know how angry I would be if the House of Commons legislated on a domestic Scottish issue over the head of Holyrood”.

This motion is an ignoble endeavour to take advantage of a temporary Executive lacuna and to foist legislation unconstitutionally on to the people of Northern Ireland. In so doing, it would radically alter our own abortion laws here in England and Wales.

Although the Bill has yet to be published, let us look at what it would do. It seeks to permit a woman up to 24 weeks pregnant to obtain an abortion for any or no reason at all—abortion on demand up to five months of pregnancy. We already have some of the most extreme abortion laws in the world, but this would make them even more so. There is no public call or appetite for this whatsoever. Indeed, it is the opposite; there is clearly grave public concern. Apart from Brexit, I have had more cards from constituents asking me to vote against this ten-minute rule Bill than on any other issue in this Parliament. Only 21% of women in England and Wales want an extension to our abortion laws, and less than 2% of them are in favour of sex-selective abortion, which the Bill would legalise up to 24 weeks. It is no good the hon. Lady arguing, as she has, that clinicians’ regulations or practice could cover that issue. The fact is that if her proposals go through, sex-selective abortion will not be illegal in this country up to 24 weeks. Do we want to go the way of Canada, which is now described as “a haven for parents who would terminate female foetuses in favour of having sons”?

Do we really want to support a Bill—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must be heard. If she wishes to put the matter to the vote, which I believe she does and which is entirely proper, the House will then cast its judgment, but she must be heard with courtesy.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do want to put the matter to a vote.

Do we really want to support a Bill that could remove the only opportunity that many women have, often at the most vulnerable stage, to speak confidentially and one-to-one with a doctor about their concerns on abortion and what their alternatives might be? If we really trust women and want them to make the most informed decision and give them the best support we can, surely we should not take away this important legal safeguard. The bottom line is that if there is an abusive relationship, and there is no legal requirement for a doctor’s involvement and no need for a reason to be given for an abortion, it is far more likely that a vulnerable woman will be pressurised into having an abortion by an abusive partner. This Bill does not improve protection for vulnerable women. It reduces it.

The hon. Lady talked about the legislation being out of date, but should we reinforce, as this motion proposes, an outdated 24-week time limit when babies are consistently surviving now at 22 weeks, and some even at 21 weeks and a few days? The Bill is out of step with scientific progress and public opinion. Some 70% of women want this time limit lowered.

In recent weeks, lobbyists supporting this motion, as the hon. Lady said, have said that the UN has called for this change. The UN has done no such thing. The lobbyists for this change cite a report by a minor UN sub-committee, which does not have any standing to rule on the UK’s legal obligations in this respect. As for the non-binding judgment of the Supreme Court, which has also been used to justify this motion, there is nothing in that judgment that could remotely be said to give rise to anything approaching a requirement for the Bill. As Lady Hale said there, we in this place do not have to act.

We should not act, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, on this issue—not only because it would be unconstitutional, though that is enough, but because the complex ramifications of this proposal, which have clearly not been thought through, would result in contradictory and inconsistent results in different parts of the UK. Those are too detailed to be debated here, but Northern Ireland would in fact be left with a total legal void, with no law covering, for example, the place where an abortion could occur and no legal requirement for abortions to be restricted to legally approved hospitals or clinical settings—abortions for any reason or no reason in any place.

The permanent secretary of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland was asked this year, “What is the situation if the 1861 Act was to be repealed in the UK?”

His answer was: “This scenario would leave abortion unregulated in Northern Ireland.”

The best people could hope for there would be some guidance from the Department of Health. The hon. Lady places great reliance on regulators, but regulators do not have the standing of law, as we have recently seen in cases of regulatory failure by the Care Quality Commission. Regulation cannot replace legislation. Taking the responsibility for abortion out of the hands of elected representatives and putting it in the hands of unaccountable medical bodies would be a derogation of our responsibility as Members of Parliament.

To close, I repeat that as Members of Parliament, we must respect our devolution settlements, and particularly in this instance that of Northern Ireland. Whatever Members’ views on abortion, we must vote against this proposal. It is unconstitutional, legally incoherent, untimely and unwanted.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 208, Noes 123.

Division No. 244] [12.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That Diana Johnson, Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, Dr Sarah Wollaston, Stella Creasy, Nicky Morgan, Liz Saville Roberts, Norman Lamb, Jo Stevens, Anna Soubry, Christine Jardine, Crispin Blunt and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Diana Johnson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 276).

Civil Liability Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

Restriction on increase in small claims limit for relevant personal injuries

(1) In this section, the “PI small claims limit” refers to the maximum value of a claim for damages for personal injuries for which, in accordance with Civil Procedure Rules, the small claims track is the normal track.

(2) Civil Procedure Rules may not increase the PI small claims limit in respect of relevant injury claims to an amount above £1,000 for the first time unless—

(a) the Lord Chancellor is satisfied, and has certified in writing, that on the day the rules are to come into force, the value of £1,000 on 1 April 1999 adjusted for inflation, computed by reference to CPI, would be at least £1,500, and

(b) the rules increase the PI small claims limit to no more than £1,500.

(3) Civil Procedure Rules may not increase the PI small claims limit in respect of relevant injury claims on any subsequent occasion unless—

(a) the Lord Chancellor is satisfied, and has certified in writing, that on the day the rules are to come into force, the value of £1,000 on 1 April 1999 adjusted for inflation, computed by reference to CPI, would be at least £500 greater than on the day on which the rules effecting the previous increase were made, and

(b) the rules increase the PI small claims limit by no more than £500.

(4) In this section—

“CPI” means the all items consumer prices index published by the Statistics Board;

“relevant injury” means an injury which is an injury of soft tissue in the neck, back, or shoulder and which is caused as described in paragraphs (b) and (c) of section 1(4) (negligence while using a motor vehicle on a road, etc.);

“relevant injury claim” means a claim for personal injury that consists only of, or so much of a claim for personal injury as consists of, a claim for damages for pain, suffering and loss of amenity caused by a relevant injury, and which is not a claim for an injury in respect of which a tariff amount is for the time being prescribed under section 2.”—(Gloria De Piero.)

This new clause would limit increases in the whiplash small claims limit to inflation (CPI), and allow the limit to increase only when inflation had increased the existing rate by £500 since it was last set.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.13 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 2—Small Claims Track: Children and Protected Parties—

‘(1) The Small Claims Track Limit in relation to claims made by children and protected parties for whiplash injuries may not be increased unless the increase is to an amount which is not more than the value of £1,000 on 1 April 1999 adjusted for inflation, computed by reference to the consumer prices index.

(2) In subsection (1),

“children” means any person or persons under 18;
“protected parties” means any person who lacks capacity to conduct the proceedings;
“lacks capacity” means lacks capacity within the meaning of the Mental Capacity Act 2005’.

This new clause would limit increases in the small claims track limit for those suffering whiplash injuries to inflationary rises only for people who are either children or people lacking capacity to make decisions for themselves (as defined in the Mental Capacity Act 2005).

Gloria De Piero: We are again confronted with the reforms in the Bill, which will cost the NHS at least £6 million a year and taxpayers at least £140 million a year, the Government admit. Even they accept that it will result in more than 100,000 injured people not pursuing a legitimate claim that they could pursue now; we say the figure is far higher. Insurers, meanwhile, will get an extra £1.3 billion of profit every year. The Government say that they will hand 80% of that to consumers in the form of reduced premiums, but they have said that before, and insurers have saved over £11 billion since the last Government reforms in this area, in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Despite a brief dip in 2012-13, premiums are now higher than ever.

The Government have moved a little on the Bill, and in Committee the Minister confirmed what he intimated on Second Reading: that vulnerable road users will be exempted from both the Bill and the small claims limit. That is welcome. As Labour has done repeatedly throughout the process, we will attempt today to make the Bill fairer still by setting out some key amendments.

New clause 1 would ensure that the whiplash small claims limit could be increased only in line with inflation based on the consumer prices index, and it follows Lord Justice Jackson’s recommendation that increases should come in £500 increments and only when inflation justifies them.

One of the most disappointing aspects of this package of reforms is the Government’s attempts to sneak through key changes to the small claims track limit through the use of statutory instruments. Today we want to give those changes the scrutiny they sorely deserve and put them in the Bill.

Whereas the threshold for getting legal representation for personal injuries is currently £1,000, the Government are trying to raise it to £2,000 or £5,000, which will make a massive difference to someone injured through no fault of their own. That position is supported by a raft of experts, including some in the Minister’s own ranks—the Tory Chair of the Select Committee on Justice for one. The White Book, which I took the trouble of sharing with the Minister in Committee, shows that there was an effective 20% increase in the small claims limit in 1999 when special damages were removed from the calculation of the limit. I note that the Lord Chancellor conceded in his letter to the Chair of the Justice Committee dated 15 August 2018 that 1999 is the correct date from which to calculate an increase.

It is worth pausing at this point, since the Government now accept that there was a significant change in 1999, to understand what that change meant. An example is given in paragraph 26.6.2 of the White Book:

“a claim for £4,000 for loss of earnings and other losses, plus a claim for £800 for damages for pain and suffering, is a claim which would be allocated to the small claims track”.

In layman’s terms, a claim may be made for under £1,000 for pain and suffering, but when losses and expenses are added in it could be considerably greater. The example in the White Book suggests that, if an £800 pain and suffering award has a losses and expenses claim of £4,000, although the total value of the claim is £4,800, it still falls into the small claims track. We are talking about claims far in excess of the small claims limit.

Lord Justice Jackson, in his review of civil litigation costs, all the recommendations of which the Government accepted and implemented in the 2012 Act, said in paragraph 1.3 of chapter 19 of his 2009 review:

“Personal injuries litigation is the paradigm instance of litigation in which the parties are in an asymmetric relationship.”

In words that we all understand, this is David versus Goliath. Sir Rupert Jackson went on to say that “the only reason to increase the Personal Injury small claims limit would be to reflect inflation since 1999,” and that “I propose that the present limit stays at £1,000 until inflation warrants an increase to £1,500.”

He could not have been clearer, yet the Government appear to have plucked the proposed £2,000 limit out of thin air.

The new clause states that the CPI, which is used for the uprating of pensions and benefits paid to injured workers, should be used to calculate the small claims limit. Even the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agrees that CPI is the way to go. She said earlier this year to a House of Lords Committee:

“CPI is a much better measure of inflation…we are seeking to move away from RPI”.

The Governor of the Bank of England agrees, too. He has said:

“We have RPI, which most would acknowledge has known errors. We have CPI, which is what virtually everyone recognises and is in our remit.”

It is perfectly clear what we need to do: enshrine CPI as the key measure in the Bill.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting the Government to admit that the increases are arbitrary and not linked to inflation in any way. Is it not the case, therefore, that the only reason for the increases is to prevent injured people from getting representation and thereby preclude people with meritorious cases from getting the damages that they deserve?

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Even if we use RPI, the Government still do not get to their proposed £2,000 new small claims limit. Instead, using the flawed RPI from 1999 would take the £1,000 to roughly £1,700. That is what we on the Labour Benches suspect is going on here.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an argument about whether RPI or CPI should be used, but is there not a bigger point here? For almost all claims generally, outside this area, the small claims track limit is £10,000. If we are to be consistent, is there not a case for making it £10,000, the same as everything else?
Gloria De Piero: We are talking about physical injuries.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Surely the only gainers here are the insurance companies. Most people, because legal aid has been reduced, cannot afford solicitors.

Gloria De Piero: Exactly. I do not think anybody in this House will want to shed a tear for those insurance companies whose profits are going up and up. In 2017, profits for Direct Line went up 52% to £570 million and Aviva recorded a profit of £1.6 billion—and I have not even talked about the packages that some insurance company bosses take home.

The Government appear to have rounded this figure up. We say base the figure on the advice and recommendations of countless experts and follow the evidence. Even if the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) does not listen to me, I wish he would follow the evidence of the experts. New clause 1 does just that. It would increase the limit only by CPI since 1999 and limit any increase to £1,500. That way, injured people with significant injuries and potentially even more significant losses will get the representation they need and deserve.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that in the case of an accident at work it is even more important that an injured employee is able to get legal representation to take a case against their employer? The employer will be armed with lawyers and their employers’ liability insurance company. That is stacked up against an individual whose task will be hard enough. They will be feeling victimised enough as it is.

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not an easy thing to take a case against your boss. You need a lawyer to hold your hand, an expert to talk you through, and the Government’s proposals are going to make that so much more difficult. She makes an appropriate point.

New clause 2 would ensure that children and protected persons, for example those lacking mental capacity, are treated the same as other vulnerable groups by excluding them from the small claims limit increase for whiplash injuries. Having made a welcome concession on Second Reading, and clarified in Committee that they would exclude vulnerable road users from the impact of the Bill and secondary measures on the small claims court limit, the Government appear to have forgotten others. Horse riders, pedestrians, motorcyclists and cyclists are rightly to be excluded from the changes, but some of the most vulnerable in our society, who are currently recognised by the courts as requiring special status, will be left, with everybody else, facing a new small claims limit of £2,000 or £5,000. As it stands, any settlement awarded to those who lack capacity to conduct their own proceedings, such as children or someone suffering with a mental disability, must be rubber-stamped by a judge because of the claimant’s recognised vulnerabilities. That will continue to be the case after these changes are introduced.

The law requires children and other protected people to have a litigation friend to conduct proceedings on their behalf. In the small claims court, those who provide this required representation are not and will not be paid for their time. Yet by increasing the small claims limit, there will be a significant increase in the number of people coming through the small claims court with higher-value and more complex cases, where they need a lawyer more than ever. We are asking a litigation friend to take on potentially complicated matters for those most in need, on their own, in their own time, for no pay. Injured horse riders, cyclists and pedestrians and motorcyclists will not be subject to a tariff. The small claims limit for them will remain at £1,000, meaning that they will get a lawyer to act for them for free in any case over that value.

Can the Government not see that children and protected persons need this support, too? How on earth can the Government justify protecting one vulnerable group but not another? Why is the horse rider worthy of exemption, but not a child or a person without the capacity to conduct proceedings? Are we really willing to let some of the most vulnerable people in our justice system be left simply to hope for the good will of others to protect their interests because we in this House have failed to do so?

I know that the Minister is aware of this issue from discussion in Committee with my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). The Minister suggested returning to this point and that he would be very interested to see an amendment tabled. So here is his chance: a ready-made amendment that makes a simple correction and is an opportunity for the Government to rectify what I presume is an oversight. It removes children from the changes being made to the small claims limit or tariff, and ensures that protected groups are excluded from the increase, the same as horse riders, cyclists and pedestrians. It removes the double standard of some vulnerable road users being granted an exemption and others not. Ultimately, it does little more than extend the protections already afforded to some and allow the Government to show that they care for all.

Chris Philp: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me so early in this debate. I rise to oppose the Opposition’s new clause 1, which seeks to prevent the Government or any other public body from increasing the small claims track limit in relation to these personal injury cases, particularly road traffic personal injury cases, above £1,500.

I strongly oppose the measure. I touched on one of the reasons for doing so in my intervention on the shadow Minister earlier. For the vast majority of general commercial claims and indeed personal claims, the small claims track limit is £10,000. The reason it is as high as £10,000 is that some level of materiality is applied to the claim in question. The view taken by Parliament in the past, rightly, is that matters below the £10,000 limit should be sufficiently simple for a small claims track procedure to be used without the involvement of often very expensive lawyers.

In response to my intervention, the shadow Minister, before she was distracted by another intervention, drew attention to the fact that these are personal injuries. I accept that point, of course. However, the fact that personal injuries is not germane, in my view, to the question, which is: is the matter sufficiently simple to be adjudicated via the small claims track rather than
through lawyers? That is the question—not whether the matter is serious or not serious but whether the matter is sufficiently simple to be dealt with properly by the small claims track rather than through lawyers. That is why I think there is a strong case, on the grounds of consistency, for a £10,000 rather than a £5,000 limit.

**Ruth George**: In road accident claims and particularly in employment liability cases at work, establishing who is to blame for an accident is far from simple. It is an extremely different sort of case from that of establishing whether a fridge was working or not when it was bought, or whether there is something wrong with a car. I really think the hon. Gentleman is not doing justice to the victims of personal injury accidents by the arguments that he seeks to make.

**Chris Philp**: Of course the £10,000 small claims track limit applies to a far wider range of issues than simply whether a fridge functions or not. The hon. Lady mentions as an example the question of culpability for a road traffic accident. Given that we are talking about much less serious types of injury if the limit is, say, £5,000, determining responsibility for that road traffic accident does not need to be an enormously complicated procedure. For those of us who have been involved in such road traffic accidents, the minor ones we are talking about here, determining responsibility is not a highly complicated matter. I accept that, in much more difficult cases where very serious injuries have been suffered, one must of course take a lot more legal care and attention. For very minor injuries, however, where by definition the accident is a minor one, I suggest that determining responsibility and culpability does not need to be an extremely complicated matter.

**Andy Slaughter**: With the greatest respect, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman knows what he is talking about. Given of the relatively low levels of compensation for injury, the effect of a £5,000 injury can be quite severe and debilitating over a period of time. The complexity of personal injury cases, which involve expert evidence and issues of causation, means that they are in a different category. Even the Government accept that, so he is batting on a rather poor wicket.

1.30 pm

**Chris Philp**: The hon. Gentleman’s arguments are ones that the legal community often advance, whether in this arena or others, to justify very high levels of legal and judicial intervention, which is often very expensive. We need to maintain a sense of proportionality, lest legal costs and expenses get out of control.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Chris Philp**: I shall in just a moment. I have seen figures suggesting that 47% of the pay-outs made by insurance companies for these relatively minor road traffic injuries get consumed by legal fees. If such a high proportion of pay-outs is being consumed by expenses, it suggests to me that the entire system is out of proportion, and that some reform is therefore needed. I give way to the Chair of the Justice Committee.

**Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I should declare that I chair the all-party group on insurance and financial services. I agree with my hon. Friend’s opposition to the new clauses. Does he have any thoughts on why personal injury claims have risen by 40% over the last decade, yet during the same period, cars have become safer and accidents have reduced by nearly a third?
Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right—he makes exactly the point that I was about to come on to. Over about a decade in which accidents have reduced by 30% and cars have become safer, the number of claims has gone up by 40%. He asks why, and I think it goes back to qualified one-way costs shifting. There is a huge financial incentive for claimants to have a go—encouraged, of course, by claims management companies—in the hope that they can make a successful claim. Defendants, typically insurance companies, have rather irresponsibly taken the view that because defending one of these claims—probably successfully—will cost £10,000 or perhaps more, they should simply choose to settle, which may involve paying out £3,000 or £4,000, without bothering to defend the claim. Obviously word has spread both in the claims management community and among the wider public that people can simply make a claim and the insurance company will settle, because it is cheaper for them to settle a bad claim than to fight it. That has created the most extraordinary perverse incentives. Insurance companies have been seriously at fault, as they have set up this situation by paying out for claims with no merit, for understandable commercial reasons, but they have made a big mistake, and we now have to correct it through the Bill.

My hon. Friend asks why the number of claims has increased so dramatically. It is because claims management companies have been phoning around, encouraging the public to submit fraudulent claims, and I will elaborate on that in a moment.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me in saying that insurance companies are paying up on a regular basis. They are not even defending these claims, yet the Bill is designed to protect them. What does he say about that?

Chris Philp: The companies are not defending the claims because qualified one-way costs shifting makes it more expensive for them to successfully defend a claim than simply to pay it out. The system simply is not working.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman think that any genuine claimants will be hit by this measure and will not receive the compensation that they should get?

Chris Philp: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair concern. Of course, we need to make sure that we do not overcompensate and find ourselves in a situation in which genuine claimants are prevented from claiming. The way in which we are legislating strikes that balance genuine claimants and all our constituents pay. Fraudulent claims are extremely bad for society as a whole. They encourage a sense that people can somehow get money without really deserving it, which is morally corrosive as well as financially damaging.

Jo Stevens: I am sure that no one in the Chamber thinks that we should encourage fraudulent claims—absolutely not—but may I bring the hon. Gentleman back to some facts? Between 2015 and 2017, the number of registered claims for whiplash fell by 15%, while the number of claims being reported through the police also fell, which might have something to do with the 37% reduction in the number of road traffic police officers in the last 10 years.

Chris Philp: Clearly the number of injury claims made via an insurance company is not related to the number of police officers on the street. The hon. Lady mentions the slight but welcome reduction in the number of whiplash injuries. Over the same period, the number of claims to insurance companies for back injuries has increased, so the total number of claims is down only very slightly over the last couple of years, and is still dramatically up over 10 years, which is clearly a more meaningful period. When the two are taken together, therefore, there has not been a significant reduction.

Robert Neill: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Philp: How could I possibly resist my hon. Friend?

Robert Neill: The House will know about my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned claims management companies. Would he agree that some of the concerns about balancing access to justice with discouraging fraudulent claims—we all agree about them—would be met by continuing to review and strengthen the regulation of claims management companies, which are not regulated to the degree that solicitors are, and in particular by bearing down on the employment of paid McKenzie friends—non-qualified, quasi-lawyers who are particularly rife in the claims management sector? Will he work with me in persuading the Government to move swiftly to ban them?

Chris Philp: Once again my hon. Friend makes a very good point—two very good points, in this case. The operation of claims management companies, which have been actively engaged in encouraging the public to commit fraud, has had an extremely negative effect in this area. I want an outright ban on them making cold calls, but I am slightly concerned that even if the Government take all the action that he and I would like, these people, being extremely adept in such matters,
would adapt their behaviour to circumvent the legislation and regulation. For example, they might start making cold calls from outside the UK’s legal jurisdiction, as we saw following the ban on referral fees that came into force two or three years ago. Insurance companies were banned from receiving referral fees from claims management companies, but some insurance companies and claims management companies sought to circumvent the ban by setting up what they euphemistically termed “alternative business structures”, whereby the claims management company effectively remunerated the insurance company via an equity stake rather than a referral fee. I am therefore concerned that even if we take all the action we can, these often rather dubious characters will find new and ingenious ways of circumventing the legislation.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman supports an outright ban on cold calling by claims management companies, but does he agree that the Government’s measures in the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 do not go far enough? Rather than punishing injured victims, would it not be far better to introduce that outright ban on claims management companies’ cold calling?

Chris Philp: As I said a moment ago to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, an outright ban would be welcome—it might be something the Government are looking at in any case—but because these people are so ingenious at circumventing even the best-written rules and regulations, there would still be a problem.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—he is being most generous with his time. May I press him on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) about McKenzie friends? I am going back years now, but in my day, when I first started at the Bar, the concept worked very well: they were volunteers who accompanied people to court and assisted them, and they certainly were not paid. Surely we just need to go back to the system as was, as I suggest that things would then work very well.

Chris Philp: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, who I know has a distinguished legal background. Both he and the Chair of the Justice Committee have powerfully made the point that McKenzie friends should be voluntary and unpaid. I hope the Minister heard that excellent recommendation, which has now been made by two learned hon. Members of this House.

Sir Edward Davey: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on making a speech against the Bill. He has admitted that the insurance companies should be fighting the claims, that McKenzie friends should not be paid and that claims management companies should be regulated. He might not have realised it, but he has defeated the Bill by himself.

1.45 pm

Chris Philp: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for granting to me such wide-ranging powers of persuasion, but I am not speaking against the Bill; I am speaking only against new clause 1. Despite all the measures we have just been discussing, including the three that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, I do not think that they, on their own, will be enough, for the reasons I have outlined. The financial incentives created by qualified one-way cost shifting will remain, and claims management companies will find ways of circumventing any tightening of the rules that might be legislated for separately. There is no question but that the British public are being incited to submit fraudulent claims on an industrial scale—[Interruption.] The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), is tut-tutting and shaking his head in a way that leads me to believe he disagrees with that statement—I think that I have fairly summarised his view.

Eddie Hughes: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Philp: I was about to reply to the shadow Minister’s implied disagreement, but go on then; I give way.

Eddie Hughes: I just wondered if my hon. Friend would comment on a previous interaction between me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about stock car racers, who obviously are involved in multiple collisions and yet do not seem to suffer any whiplash, or at least not to the same extent as others. In addition, people in Greece make far fewer claims than we do in the UK. Will he comment on that?

Chris Philp: Once again, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Not only has the number of claims for such injuries dramatically increased over the past 10 years, at a time when the number of road traffic accidents has fallen, but they are far more prevalent here than in other European jurisdictions—not just Greece but countries such as France and Germany. Could it be that British necks are weaker than French and German necks, or could it be that our system encourages fraudulent claims?

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman, who is making an excellent speech, has answered his own question. He has talked about the prevalence of claims management companies and the way they are inciting people to make claims on an industrial scale. Surely those claims management companies, and the insurance companies they are linked to in most cases, should be bearing the brunt of this problem, not the innocent victims of accidents, as would be the case under the Bill.

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady evidently agrees that claims management companies have been inciting fraud on an industrial scale—a point of view that her Front-Bench colleague perhaps disagrees with. That said, claims management companies are only part of the problem. As I said, the incentives inherent in the system have encouraged the kind of behaviour I have been describing. I want to come to the implied sedentary disagreement from the shadow Minister earlier. I inferred from his gesticulation that he disagreed with my suggestion that claims management companies were inciting fraud on an industrial scale. I will start with a personal anecdote, which I realise does not make the general point, but I will then come on to that more general point. My interest in this area stems from personal experience. About three or four years ago, just before being first elected, I had a minor road traffic accident while driving...
along the M5 to Cornwall with my wife and our two small children. [Interjection.] I think I am being heckled by the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Nobody was injured in the accident—the bumper was a bit dented, but that was it. It happened at low speed, the traffic having slowed down. For about a year, however, I was bombarded with calls to my personal mobile by people from claims management companies. I think, that had somehow found out about the bump, trying to persuade me that I or my family had suffered a neck injury. No matter how often or how insistently I told them that everyone was fine, they would say things such as, “If you just say your neck hurts, you’ll get £3,000.” The incitement to commit fraud was clear and direct. Subsequently, as recently as in the last two or three months, I have received repeated automated calls—robo calls—again to my mobile, although wholly unrelated. I think, to the first set of calls. I received a recorded message saying, “We are calling about your accident. Do you want to talk about it?” There was then a pause during which I was expected to reply. That is clearly happening on an industrial scale.

Jo Stevens: Who does the hon. Gentleman think sold his details to that claims management company?

Chris Philp: In the first instance, it was very likely to have been an insurance company that had been circumventing the referral fee ban through an alternative business structure, which is a practice that I wholly deplore, and I encourage the Government to ban it. However, as I have said three or four times before, simply trying to legislate away claims management companies will not in itself be enough when the incentives inherent in the system are so powerful. Raising the small claims track limit to, say, £5,000—which is still half the level of the general small claims track limit—will serve to diminish the financial incentives in the system whereby lawyers are taking nearly half the value of pay-outs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Philp: I give way to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

Andy Slaughter: The proportion of fraudulent claims is about 1%. If I understand the hon. Gentleman’s argument correctly, he is saying that all meritorious claimants should be barred from proper representation so we can identify that 1%, because it is too difficult for the Government to legislate. Is not the truth of the matter that the Government, as always, are joined at the hip to the Association of British Insurers, and are simply legislating in its interests?

Chris Philp: I disagree with all three things that the hon. Gentleman has said. First, as I said earlier to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), the Government have no intention at all of preventing legitimate claims from being made. The Government are keen to facilitate those claims, and the online claims portal will help with that. There is categorically no intention of disbaring, preventing or in any other way inhibiting legitimate claims from being made.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman referred to the 1% fraudulent claims figure. The reason the reported figure, which in my submission is dramatically under-reported, is so low is that insurance companies are, quite wrongly, choosing to settle those claims—even suspicious claims, even claims without merit—without defending them, because the cost of defending them, which is about £10,000 or £15,000, far exceeds the value of the pay-out. So the 1% figure cited by the hon. Gentleman goes nowhere close to reflecting the true scale of fraudulent claims in this area.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the hon. Gentleman respond to a general point? Does he believe that when we are tackling a problem, in any aspect of society, we should deal with the symptom or the cause?

Chris Philp: Of course we should deal principally with the cause, and that is what the Bill seeks to do. [Interjection.] The right hon. Gentleman asked about causes. We can talk about claims management companies and we can talk about referral fees—those are important issues to deal with—but the cause of this problem is the financial incentives created by qualified one-way costs shifting, whereby claimants, aided and abetted by claims management companies, can have a crack for free, suffering no loss if their unmeritorious claims are dismissed. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to go into the cause of the problem, that is the cause of it, and elevating the small claims track limit to £5,000 will do a great deal to eliminate the cause. If he wishes to address the cause, as his intervention implied, he should vote against new clause 1.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Philp: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. It is not just the case that we do not really know the number of fraudulent cases, although we can certainly make a very fair estimate, given that there are 200,000 extra claims and 85% of them relate to whiplash. The real issue is that we tend not to see any medical reports because of the settlements. It is not just that the cases are not defended; we never see the medical reports, so we do not know exactly what the full figure would be.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Because the claims are settled upfront by the payment of, typically, £3,000 or £4,000, there is often no medical examination. There is therefore no evidence on which to assess whether the claim was fraudulent or not, which is why the 1% figure cited by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is essentially meaningless.

One of the other provisions in the Bill, which we debated on Second Reading, is the requirement for a medical examination to take place before an offer is made. That is an essential reform. In response to an intervention from me, the Secretary of State for Justice confirmed that such medical examinations would have to be face to face. That would begin to address the issue that my hon. Friend, the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) has rightly raised.

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me again; he is being very generous. He mentioned the purpose of raising the small claims limit to £5,000,
and what that would do. What it will do is deny victims of injury access to justice, as the Government’s own impact assessment expressly states.

**Chris Philp:** I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady’s intervention. I think that in the case of the smaller claims, whose value is less than £5,000, it is perfectly possible and perfectly reasonable for individuals to submit their own claims—these are relatively simple matters—using the online portal to whose importance my hon. Friend Mr. Philp drew our attention earlier. Members have also referred to the role that unpaid McKenzie friends can play in assisting members of the public who submit claims. I do not accept the suggestion that bona fide claims will be prevented or inhibited by the proposed reforms.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Chris Philp:** The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has tried several times to intervene, so I must give him an opportunity to make his point.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he has been generous. May I put a different scenario to him, because this aspect of what he is saying is confusing me? If, in the course of his employment, a resident of Glasgow South West were injured in Croydon South, why would he be treated less favourably because the injury was sustained in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency than he would be in the constituency of Glasgow South West? In Scotland personal injury claims are exempt from the small claims limit, and civil legal aid is available to claimants.

**Chris Philp:** I infer from the hon. Gentleman’s question that these matters are devolved in Scotland. Is that the case?

**Chris Stephens:** It is a different system.

**Chris Philp:** The two cases are treated differently because there is an entirely different legal system in Scotland, and there is a devolved Government there. It is perfectly within the competence of that devolved Government to take a different view. Clearly the Government in Scotland, and the Scottish Parliament, have taken a different view, as they are entitled to do so, but I, as an English MP—as a London MP—take my own view, and it is the one that I have been expressing here today.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, but does he realise that the Bill affects 407,000 people—Scottish residents who are employed in England and Wales?

**Chris Philp:** It may well affect residents of Scotland. Of course, it also affects residents of France, Germany, the United States and Kazakhstan who may choose to visit my constituency. I strongly encourage all of them to do that, by the way. If, heaven forbid, they were to suffer an injury in Croydon South, they would be equivalently affected. The mere fact that there are different rules in different jurisdictions is no reason not to change the rules in this one. Which jurisdiction is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that we align ourselves with? Scotland? France?

**Chris Stephens:** Scotland!

**Chris Philp:** While I admire the hon. Gentleman’s patriotism in inviting us to follow the Scottish example, I am afraid that this Parliament will form its own view on what is appropriate, and I do not think that he can be in any doubt about what I think the right view is on the question before us today.

**Ruth George:** The hon. Gentleman is indeed being very generous. However, he constantly claims that the injuries sustained in road traffic accidents are minor. Written into the Bill is that an injury caused by the “rupture of a...tendon or ligament in the neck, back or shoulder” that lasts for up to two years will be included within the limits. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that sort of “minor injury”, which could affect people for such a large portion of their lives, should be included?

**Chris Philp:** The Government consulted extensively on the definitions before legislating. I understand that the definition to which the hon. Lady has referred was not accepted by the Sentencing Council, and I would certainly not wish to second-guess or naysay the recommendation of such an august institution.

I did not quite have the opportunity to finish a point that I was making in response to the hon. Member for Leeds East who, some moments ago, was expressing disagreement with my suggestion that claims were being farmed on an industrial scale. I have given my own personal example, but I also want to submit to the House, in support of what I said, an example uncovered by The Sunday Times in July 2015. It involved a company called Complete Claim Solutions, which was based principally in Brighton but also had an office in the Borough of Croydon—although not in my constituency, I hasten to add. It was discovered to be systematically encouraging members of the public to submit fraudulent claims. It was such a disreputable organisation that it used the film “The Wolf of Wall Street” as an instructional video illustrating the kind of behaviour it considered appropriate. This is no small company; it was responsible for making no fewer than 7 million outbound calls per year. One of its salespeople, Tom Murray, was recorded boasting to a journalist from The Sunday Times that he was able to easily persuade the public to lie. He said that “if they want that £2,000, they’ll lie.”

He also said: “When it comes down to a woman who’s had an accident...I’ll make her cry” as a way of persuading her to make a claim. That is just one example of the shocking behaviour of these claims management companies, in this example one making 7 million calls per year.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**2 pm**

**Chris Philp:** I have taken up a great deal of the House’s time. [Interruption.] I am glad that I have at last said something that finds favour with the Opposition Front Bench. I am sure many other colleagues wish to contribute to this debate.

There is overwhelming evidence that our system is broken, in terms not only of the claims management companies and the use of alternative business structures to get information into their hands, but of the fundamental
[Chris Philp]

incentives inherent in qualified one-way costs shifting. The proposals the Government are contemplating to increase the small claims track limit will do a great deal to choke off this problem at source—to deal with the cause, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton requested a few moments ago. For that reason I will be energetically and enthusiastically voting against new clause 1.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I welcome the opportunity to try to counter the worst aspects of this Bill by speaking to Opposition new clauses 1 and 2.

Access to justice may sound like a catchphrase or buzzword, but it underpins so much within our society, and it should not be bandied about and dismissed with the cavalier attitude currently shown by this Government. The Bill will cause a regression in the ability of genuinely injured people to seek compensation and justice for their injuries. The narrative of wanting to clamp down on fraudulent claims has long worn thin and the statistics the Government are using to justify these policies are entirely erroneous. Of course fraudulent claims are wrong and should be investigated and clamped down on, but we are not experiencing the epidemic levels we have been repeatedly warned of. In 2017, 0.22% of all motor claims were proven to be fraudulent; bearing in mind that that is for all motor claims, whiplash injuries will be an even smaller percentage.

Instead of looking at empirical evidence to create legislation, the Government are using disputed statistics to legitimise their agenda. This is wrong, and the impact on access to justice that the Bill will have will be substantial: 350,000 injured people without the free legal cover they are currently able to access. That is the true cost of implementing the Government’s package of measures.

As I outlined on Second Reading and in Committee, the changes to the small claims limit—although not on in the Bill, they are intrinsically related to its content—will be utterly damming on any reasonable definition of access to justice. The proposal to increase the small claims limit from £1,000 to £5,000 in road traffic injury cases and from £1,000 to £2,000 in all other personal injury claims would mean thousands of injured people could fall out of scope for free legal advice and representation and could be denied justice. Costs are not recoverable from the losing party in the small claims court, so injured people will either have to pay their legal costs themselves, which is likely to be cost-prohibitive, or, more likely, forgo legal assistance altogether, or simply not pursue a claim.

In giving evidence during the Justice Committee’s inquiry into the small claims limit, the Minister in the Lords, Lord Keen, suggested that injured people could instead seek advice from their citizens advice bureau. I am sure that many Members will understand the great number of cuts that have befallen citizen advice bureaux in recent years, and this suggestion is not only unfeasible but is completely out of touch. If there is to be any change in the small claims limit, it must be done proportionately by pegging it against consumer price inflation.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) rose—

Ellie Reeves: I want to make some progress.

That this must be done in this proportionate way is a widely held view, and those who advocate the approach include the Justice Committee, which published a recommendation in its small claims limit report in May; trade unions, including USDAW; the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers; the Law Society; and over 50 Members of this House who have signed my early-day motion calling for the increase to be in line with CPI inflation. These disproportionate and misguided hikes are, it seems, favoured only by this Tory Government and the insurance industry.

New clause 1 in my name and those of my hon. Friends would limit increase in the whiplash small claims limit in line with inflation and permit the limit to increase only when inflation had increased the existing rate by £500 since it was last set. By linking any rise to inflation, it would remove the power from the Lord Chancellor to determine the level and would instead tie it to an economic measure used by both Government and the Bank of England. The Lord Chancellor has an important role, but it is not one that should be afforded powers to artificially dictate rates such as the small claims limit for political reasoning or motivation. If we remove the politics from the decision-making process by using a widely recognised measure such as CPI, people, whether insurers or injured people, can have confidence in the system. It would provide certainty and clarity, be easy to track and would allow stakeholders to adjust for subsequent rises accordingly.

Complementing new clause 1, new clause 2 would firm up the proposal made by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) in Committee that would limit increases in the small claims limit for children and people lacking capacity to make decisions for themselves. The Minister stated in Committee that vulnerable road users will be excluded from the Bill and from secondary measures on the small claims limit. This is welcome, but it is disappointing that no Government amendments have been tabled on Report to shore up that promise and include it in the Bill immediately. I hope that this is not a repeat of the Government’s promise to pass the predicted £1.3 billion-worth of insurance industry savings on to customers. I am afraid that the amendment in Committee on that issue was little more than a fudge, and its effect on customers’ premiums will be negligible at best, while the aggressive changes in the draft tariff system will involve reductions of up to 87% in payments for pain, suffering and loss of amenity from road traffic accident-related soft tissue injuries. Under the proposed tariffs, people will be compensated more for a flight delayed for three hours than for being injured for three months. The widely held and understood values of access to justice should not be undermined on a whim to satisfy the insurance industry.

What these Opposition new clauses highlight above all else is the true damage this Bill will do to access to justice and the principles that uphold the right to access to justice. In Committee, I warned the Minister that the changes made by the Government’s package of measures will be similar in scope to the disproportionate implications of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—LASPO—and the unlawful introduction of employment tribunal fees, both of which are key pieces of Tory legislation that have done nothing but remove
the rights of many people in seeking access to justice. What we have been left with is an 84% fall in civil legal aid and a 68% fall in the number of employment tribunal cases as a result of these Tory policies.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is part of a wider package of pressure on people who have some of the lowest incomes in our society? I wish to be associated with her new clauses and her points, and does she agree that the Government’s proposed measures are part of a wider package of pressure on the most vulnerable people in society?**

**Ellie Reeves: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is yet another attack on ordinary people’s access to justice. Should the Bill pass its remaining stages today, those shunned by LASPO and tribunal fees will be joined by an additional 350,000 injured people who will be left without the free legal cover they can currently access.**

**John Howell: I thank the hon. Lady and fellow Select Committee member for giving way. She has talked about access to justice, but she has not mentioned at all the impact of the online courts. Does she have a feeling about what sort of effect that would have for increasing access to justice?**

**Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point.**

The Bill will have a significant impact on access to justice, and we know that the portal system is nowhere near ready to accommodate the changes. It has not been properly tested. Under successive Tory Governments, access to justice has fast become a luxury available only to the few. A recent survey showed that 63% of Unison members would not proceed or be confident to proceed with a claim without legal representation. The small claims limit changes in the Bill will push nearly two thirds of genuinely injured people away from pursuing a claim if they do not meet the arbitrarily imposed criteria dictated by the Lord Chancellor. The idiom of adding insult to injury has never been more apt, and it is surely time to think again.

**Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have done something a bit novel: I have listened to what has been said in the debate, and my remarks will focus on that. I did not come here with a prepared speech; I came here and listened to the contributions from both sides.**

I would like to start by responding to the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and taking up a couple of points that she made. The first relates to the idea that the Government are somehow doing this because of special pleading from the insurance industry. I would want premiums to go up, but the aim of this package of measures is for premiums to go down for ordinary people. I therefore do not agree with her assertion.

Another point that the hon. Lady made was that the setting of the limit by the Lord Chancellor, or any future Lord Chancellor, was arbitrary, unfair and unjust, but that is why we have this House and why we have Ministers. They are not here just to do interviews on the “Today” programme. We have Ministers to make judgments that they are then held democratically accountable for. I accept that Labour Members—or, indeed, at some point in the very distant future, Conservative Members, when they are sitting on the Opposition Benches—might dislike a judgment that is made by a future Lord Chancellor, but we settle these things through the democratic accountability of this House. To reject that principle and to suggest that every limit in any area of law, whether this or anything else, should somehow not—

**Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He talks with great passion about the democratic accountability of this House. Does he therefore agree that any changes to the small claims limit should not be done by negative statutory instrument, as the Government are proposing, and that they should instead be debated on the Floor of the House?**

**Bim Afolami: That is an interesting point. I have served on many Committees, as we all have, and some have huge amounts of engagement from lots of Members while others have less. But this House is not just this Chamber; it is also all the Committee Rooms. Negative statutory instruments provide a way for significant amounts of secondary legislation—I do not know how many pieces of legislation; probably hundreds—to go through Parliament. I cannot agree with the hon. Lady. 100% that using that procedure will always result in a lack of democratic accountability, because frankly, in modern government, it plays a significant part in our governance process. I recognise the point she makes, however, and it is fair to say that sometimes people do not pay as much attention in Committees as they might do, but that is fundamentally the case for this Chamber, too.**

**Ruth George: Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that, on occasions, statutory instrument Committees do not provide a democratic procedure, as in the case of the cuts to criminal injuries compensation in 2012? At the time, one Committee completely overturned the Minister’s proposals and asked for them to be brought back. A separate Committee was then reconvened, made up of Parliamentary Private Secretaries, and it railroaded through exactly the same criminal injuries compensation cuts. This House should not be seeking to use that kind of procedure for something that is so important to hundreds of thousands of accident victims.**

**Bim Afolami: I do not want to leave the House, or the hon. Lady, with the impression that I believe that statutory instruments are undemocratic. They are democratic, and they are a form of how we do things in this House. I was unaware of the case that she mentioned. The broader point is that getting primary legislation through, particularly in a hung Parliament such as this, will always be difficult—[Interruption.] No, primary legislation is not always the place where we make every single change. That is why we have a Committee system.**

2.15 pm

I would also like to draw attention to the personal anecdote offered by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) about being phoned up by various claims management companies. I have had a similar experience—which I will not repeat in full—although I was going to Scotland rather than to the south-west.
I am still receiving phone calls from the company, and the fundamental reason for that is the incentive structure under which the whole industry operates. Do I agree with hon. Members on both sides who say that certain things in this area need to change? Yes, I do, but does that mean that I should reject a piece of legislation that is designed to tackle certain injustices? No, it does not. So I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on that point.

Bambos Charalambous: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that many of these claims companies operate on a no win, no fee basis? Therefore, if no payment is made and a claim is defended, the claimant will not be paid if they are defeated.

Bim Afolami: That is obviously factually accurate, but we need to ensure that we deal with the cause of these problems. As I have said, the Bill does not deal with everything, but it does deal with at least part of the problem. That, in and of itself, is a valuable thing.

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman talks about the underlying cause that makes these changes necessary, as has the hon. Member for Croydon South. As they have both identified, that underlying cause is surely the fact that insurance companies should not be defending claims that could be fraudulent.

Bim Afolami: It is partly that, but the important point is that no single piece of legislation in this House can deal with every single problem. We can identify a particular problem and deal with it in a particular piece of legislation.

Huw Merriman: Does my hon. Friend agree that we can speak proudly from these Benches about the fact that civil litigation reform over the past few years has led to changes in no win, no fee, as well as to the banning of referral fees and the use of benefits by these companies? Government Members actually have something to say on this. Those changes have also led to a reduction of about £50 in insurance premiums.

Bim Afolami: I agree with my hon. Friend. I reiterate that the point of this legislation is to bring down insurance premiums for ordinary people by, I think, between 35% and 40%. I look to the Minister to check whether that is right.

Jo Stevens: The UK’s leading insurance companies earned more than £2.6 billion in profits in 2016, up on 2015. The proposed changes do not guarantee any reductions in premiums; they simply say that the premiums may fall. There is no guarantee that they will, and we know from previous Bills that this does not happen. Why does the hon. Gentleman suppose that things will be different this time?

Bim Afolami: I take the hon. Lady’s point. The industry has pledged to pass this on. My understanding is that premiums fell by an average of roughly £50 a year in 2012. When we talk about averages, we must bear in mind that if premiums were to fall by an average of, say, £35 under this legislation, the figure in some instances would be much greater—especially for young drivers, for example. Those are my remarks, based on what I have seen and heard today, and I commend this speech to the House.

Andy Slaughter: I did not intend to speak, therefore I will be brief. The House is being treated to ad hoc speeches, which are always a delight. They sometimes benefit from a little knowledge of the subject. I gently say to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). I also urge him not to be quite so credulous of what insurance companies tell us because experience shows that they always say that premiums will go down, and sometimes they go down and then up again, and sometimes they do not go down at all.

I also wonder about the hon. Gentleman’s question of whether we can expect everything to be done in a single Bill. I would argue that the two main things that the Bill will do are to prevent people with meritorious claims and those with often serious injuries from getting into court, and, if they get there, to reduce the legitimate level of damages that they can expect to receive. Would not it be better to have a Bill that deals with a matter that probably everybody in the Chamber thinks is right to tackle: strengthening defences against fraud? There has already been some change in legislation to make it easier to defend fraud cases, yet one may ask why insurers still do not instruct lawyers—whom they are able to employ, unlike claimants, perhaps, after the Bill is passed—to defend those cases. Why do they not insist on medical evidence? Why do they in fact encourage fraud? Why does a proportion of insurance companies’ profits come either from selling information on, which perpetuates claims management companies, or from owning claims management companies themselves?

The problem with the Bill is that it has the wrong targets. I made that point earlier when I intervened on the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). All Labour Members can be brief because he substantially made the case for why this is a bad Bill, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) said.

However, the hon. Member for Croydon South said that the limit should be £10,000, as if personal injury claims were the same as simple money claims, which no one has ever argued. We are arguing about a difference in what the limit should be. In employers’ liability cases, the difference is relatively small, but the difference in road traffic accident cases is substantial: between what inflation would provide—around £1,500 as a small claims limit—and £5,000, which the Bill proposes.

The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers said about the Bill:

“Claims under £5,000 are not minor, and an increase in the small claims limit will cover far more than soft tissue injuries. These claims could include a brain or head injury, injuries to the eyes, a collapsed lung, or fractured cheekbones. This is a disproportionate response to the stated aim of dealing with whiplash claims.”

That must be right. We are talking about people who are in a vulnerable condition, having suffered personal injury. As has been said, the inequality of arms is apparent not just in the courtroom but in the background to the case, particularly in the case of employees who take on their employers. That is often done with the assistance of a trade union, lawyers and other advisers. We should not replace that tried and trusted system with McKenzie Friends—whether unpaid or unpaid—who often do more damage than good to the clients they intend to represent. I urge the Minister, even at this
stage, to listen not only to Opposition Members but to some Government Members and particularly to the Justice Committee.

I went through the painful experience of the stages of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, and I have therefore heard many of the arguments trotted out before. We went from a situation whereby legal aid was available for personal injury to no win, no fee, cases and now to qualified one way costs shifting—QOWCS. It is increasingly difficult even for those with the most meritorious cases to get representation. There is not the same availability of representation as there was.

The review of the law post-LASPO is due to report shortly. It will cover not only part 1 but part 2 of LASPO, and if we had waited, we could have seen the effect of the reform to civil litigation, but no, the Government wish to take a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The overwhelming majority—estimates are around 90% of road traffic claims—of cases will be taken out of a costs regime. That means that all those people have to sink or swim on their own. No one, not just the lawyers here, truly believes that it is easy for many people who have suffered accident and injury to navigate through the court system, particularly when they are opposed by an insurance company, with all the resources that it has.

The Bill will not benefit the motorist or the interests of justice. Above all, it will not benefit people who, through no fault of their own, have suffered often serious injuries. It is disgraceful that the Government are legislating once again in the sectional interests of the insurance industry and against those who have suffered injury.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I rise to support the Bill and speak against new clauses 1 and 2 because, whether through ending rip-off energy bills, freezing fuel duty or increasing the personal allowance for income tax, the Government’s constant focus has been to make sure that the consumer is at the heart of their work and to reduce the cost of living for millions of people.

I am therefore pleased that Ministers have identified another area in which the cost of living is artificially and unfairly inflated. At a time when our cars and roads are safer than ever, one would expect the price of motor insurance to come down. Instead, the opposite has happened. Since 2010, there has been an almost 50% increase in the cost of comprehensive insurance premiums, and a near 80% increase in the cost of third-party fire and theft insurance premiums.

Ruth George: Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that the rise in the cost of insurance is, as we have heard in the debate, down to insurance companies not tackling possibly fraudulent claims, thereby creating the problem and making huge additional profits? Does he accept that consumers are also victims of accidents and will be severely affected by the Bill?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Lady is right to say that insurance companies have a duty to tackle fraudulent claims—that is certainly the message that the Government would send out and that I endorse—but the proportion of such claims is relatively small. We need to get the incentives in the system right so that the most serious cases receive the compensation and the attention that they deserve in the legal system and that the less serious cases receive a proportionate response. Whiplash is a horrible injury, which can be very severe, but we must ensure that the incentives in the system are not so skewed as to push all cases into the most extreme bracket. That simply does not reflect the nature of the injuries that are being suffered and it is not in the country’s public policy interest to have insurance rendered hugely more expensive, which the current system does.

Ruth George: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the tariff for compensation for injuries, which judges currently use, is unfair and overcompensates people with more minor injuries? It covers a range of injuries, not just whiplash.

Mr Clarke: I am saying that there is a need for a proportionate system for compensation. The number of road traffic accident-related personal injury claims has increased by 200,000 since 2006—a rise of approximately 40%. That suggests to me that the incentives in the system are skewed. Insurers predict that, without reform, motor premiums could continue to rise at a rate of about 10% annually. That constitutes a significant burden on the cost of living for millions of us who are dependent on our cars for daily travel, especially in rural communities.

Jo Stevens: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the UK’s leading insurers paying out £2 billion to their shareholders in 2016 might have something to do with the rising cost of insurance premiums?

Mr Clarke: The Bill is designed to make sure there is a closer connection between whiplash claims and medical evidence by introducing a ban on seeking or offering to settle whiplash claims without the appropriate medical evidence. That will discourage fraudulent claims, encourage insurers to investigate claims properly and protect genuine claimants from accepting a settlement without knowing the full extent of their injury.

2.30 pm

Finally, the Bill will change the way in which the personal injury discount rate is set to help ensure genuine claimants receive no more and no less than the 100% compensation they deserve. Under the existing arrangement, the discount rate often produces significantly larger awards than 100% compensation. In fact, according to work by the Government Actuary’s Department, claimants receive, on average, 125% of their intended award at the current discount rate.

This package of measures will keep the system fair by ensuring that claimants receive the compensation they deserve while ensuring that the public are not paying unduly high premiums. Together with the changes to the small claims limit, these measures will deliver some £1.1 billion-worth of consumer savings a year and could lead to motorists’ insurance premiums falling, on average, by £35 a year. That is very welcome to most families, and it is why this legislation is right, necessary and timely.

Bambos Charalambous: Madam Deputy Speaker, is it appropriate for me to speak to new clause 2?
Bambos Charalambous: I support new clause 2, which is in my name and in the name of other hon. Members. I am concerned that the Bill takes away the protection for children and protected parties such as people with a mental capacity disability.

Under the current civil procedure rules, children and protected parties are required to have legal representation in court when there is a settlement following a civil claim. Children and protected parties are not excluded from the Bill as vulnerable road users. Prior to introducing the Bill, the Government gave exemptions to a small category of vulnerable road users, including cyclists and horse riders, but no such exemption was given to children or protected parties despite their being protected under rule 21 of the civil procedure rules.

The Government should exempt children and protected parties in accordance with rule 21, and the Minister’s own Department, the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for setting these rules. I raised this issue with him when the Bill was in Committee and, being a man of his word, he duly got back to me, but his response was disappointing. Part 21 of the civil procedure rules states that for a child or protected party settlement to be made it has to be with the approval of the court. The settlement has to go before a court; there is no issue of it going to a portal. For court approval, children and protected parties need legal representation.

The Minister’s response to me suggested that the insurance industry would provide legal representation and that this would solve the problem. Except there would be a clear conflict of interest if the same party were paying for the legal representation of both sides. When choosing a litigation friend for a child or protected party, one of the criteria, under paragraph 3.3 of practice direction 21, is that the party seeking to represent the child or protected party as a litigation friend should have “no interest adverse to that of the child or protected party”. Clearly someone who is being paid by the insurance industry against the child’s claim cannot say that they have no adverse interest.

Sometimes children will be suing their parents in a road traffic accident personal injury case, meaning that the parents will have an adverse interest and cannot act for or represent their children. By not excluding children and protected parties from this Bill, the Minister is making a mockery of the current rules that govern personal injury in England and Wales.

Why should a child be able to access legal representation in a case where they have been injured at, say, an amusement park but not when they suffer the same injuries in a road accident? As things stand, the child or protected party would still have to get a legal opinion before the court makes a settlement, but the cost of the advice would not be recoverable from the negligent defendant, or their insurer, in cases subject to the small claims tariff. Why does the Minister want to take money away from children and protected parties in order to benefit insurers?

There are complexities in these cases, and legal representation is needed more than ever in matters involving children and protected parties. I cannot understand the Government’s logic or rationale in excluding horse riders and cyclists from this Bill but not children or protected parties. Are they saying that injuries suffered by children and protected parties through no fault of their own should be treated less seriously than injuries suffered by cyclists or horse riders? This goes to the heart of the Bill, which is ill-conceived and drafted solely from the point of view of the insurance industry and not of innocent victims who make a claim.

It is shameful that the Government are willing to sacrifice the interests of innocent injured children, and to take away the protection they currently have, enshrined in law, to give the multi-billion pound insurance industry an even bigger advantage in court.

Ruth George: I rise to speak to amendment 1. This Bill was drafted at the behest of the insurance industry, as is clear from every speech in favour of it.

Ruth George: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker.

New clause 1 would amend some of the worst failings of the Bill, which has been drafted at the behest of the insurance industry over several years. The industry has failed to tackle fraudulent claims. We have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House this afternoon that the industry, which is responsible for so many of the claims management companies and for passing information on to them, is producing the problems that the Government are now seeking to address by further victimising the victims of accidents.

The insurance industry is making billions of pounds of profit and will make a further £1.3 billion from this Bill through the reduction in claims. Victims of accidents are not the people who tend to go to court. Those who lose will be denied access to justice, as both the impact assessment and the excellent report from the Justice Committee make clear.

It is a huge undertaking for a layperson to take a case to court. Most would not even dream of it, especially a case against their employer, who will be armed with their own lawyers and often with an insurance company, which will also be armed with its own lawyers. Unison, the public sector union, surveyed its members 60% and said they would not have taken a case against their employer to get the compensation they deserved for their injury at work if they had to take the case on their own without the support of a lawyer.

It is extremely difficult to determine liability in the case of many accidents at work, especially in instances like those I saw when I worked for the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. Deliveries are made to stores by a third party and there are incidents in warehouses that may be the fault of one party, the fault of another company or the fault of the employee. Those arguments are exceedingly difficult to pin down, especially for an individual claimant, and they require the assistance of a lawyer.

The Government assure us there will be an easy online portal for claimants to register a claim. I am sorry, but I am a member of the Select Committee on
Work and Pensions and we were told that there would be an online portal for universal credit, yet 47% of claimants are unable to access the portal. An online portal is, of itself, too demanding for people for whom IT is not their natural sphere. I ask the Minister to commit the Government not to roll out these changes to the small claims limit until the portal has been demonstrated to be easily usable by at least 95% of those who seek to use it. I hope that that commitment will be made during the passage of this Bill because, as we have heard, the portal is nowhere near ready and even the pilots have been found by firms of lawyers to be difficult to access.

The arguments made in favour of the Bill have been about the cost of insurance but, as we have heard, that cost has been rising at the same time as insurance companies’ profits have been rising. It is not the cost of personal injury claims that has increased insurance; those bodily injury claims have actually reduced by £850 million since 2013. A large degree of the cost rises has been due to the costs of vehicle damage, which have become far higher in the last five years—nearly £700 a year more—because cars are more complicated.

The Bill has been introduced, it is claimed, to crack down on whiplash claims, but it covers far more than simply whiplash. The definition of whiplash itself has been extended far beyond a medical definition, to include all injuries to necks and backs that relate to rupture or strain of muscles, tendons or ligaments lasting up to two years. I hope that no one on either side of the House would feel that such injuries are minor. The Bill also deals with accidents at work, public liability claims and medical negligence. USDAW has estimated that five times as many cases would be caught by this small claims limit as are caught currently. According to the TUC, only one in seven workers make a claim against their employer for an accident at work. So we can see that this move will have a severe impact on the number of claims being made.

Jo Stevens: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill will make workplaces more dangerous? I know from experience that, if employers are litigated against as a result of accidents in the workplace, they review their safety policies and make workplaces safer. This Bill will have the opposite effect.

Ruth George: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend’s point, which I raised with the Health and Safety Executive, whose laboratory is in my constituency. It concurred that one of its major concerns is that without claims being made against employers they will cease to mitigate against risk in the workplace. That is just one of the many problems the Bill will cause, both for victims of accidents and for all other employees in the workplace.

The Minister has heard many examples this afternoon of how the Government could crack down on fraud and so have come to this Government seeking their help. We have no guarantee that insurance costs will fall, but we do know that insurance companies will make £1.3 billion more a year out of this legislation and that innocent victims of accidents will suffer. I very much hope that the Minister has listened to the arguments being made on both sides of the House today and will accept the new clause.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Let me begin by paying tribute to the high quality of debate today from hon. and right hon. Members on all sides of the House. This has been a serious business. The consultation on the issue began in 2012 and the detailed measures we are debating today were announced in the Budget in autumn 2015. There are disagreements on every side of the House, which are expressed in new clauses 1 and 2, but, more generally, I hope that everybody in the House will recognise that the Bill has been adapted as we have listened a great deal to suggestions made by the Opposition and others. I pay tribute to the hon. and right hon. Members on all sides who pushed for the changes we have introduced on vulnerable road users, on the new role of the consultation with the Lord Chief Justice and on definitions, particularly in respect of whiplash. I also pay tribute to what happened in the other House, where this legislation was considerably revised and improved by efforts from Cross-Bench peers, as well as Labour, Lib Dem and Conservative peers.

2.45 pm

It is a tribute to all the work done in the other place and here that, now, having had dozens of amendments in Committee, we are down to debating two new clauses. I wish briefly to express why it is that, although we acknowledge and recognise some of the powerful arguments made by the hon. Members for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for High Peak (Ruth George) and, particularly in relation to new clause 2, for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), the Government are proposing that the new clauses should be dropped and that we should proceed with the Bill as drafted.

There are effectively five problems with new clause 1 that lead us to feel that we should not proceed with it. The first is that it would go against the entire policy intent of the Bill. What would happen if, instead of increasing the maximum limit under the small claims track to £5,000, it were held at £1,500? The tripartite policy move has attempted to tackle three things simultaneously: to reduce the incentives for fraudulent or exaggerated claims posed by the pay-outs; to remove some of the compensation that can be achieved by getting one’s legal fees covered by the defendant; and to remove some of the current requirements on medical consultation. Those three things need to go together. If we were, for example, to increase the tariffs in line with the proposals that are dealt with by some of the amendments the Opposition have tabled for consideration later, but to leave the small claims limit as it was, we would end up in an unequal system. As my hon. Friends, the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke)
have said, there are significant costs to consumers, premium payers and the social system of proceeding with a situation in which some people—not all—are encouraged to make exaggerated and, in some cases, fraudulent claims.

The Government’s position is clear: we have enormous respect for the work of personal injury lawyers, who play an honourable and important part in society in representing the interests of victims as a whole, and in no way should this Bill be read as suggesting anything other than our respect for those individuals and the work that they do. However, we argue that the purpose of the small claims court is best dealt with through focusing on the nature of the claim, not on inflation. Many of the arguments that have been made, for example by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and others, have focused on the question of inflation. Indeed, the entirety of new clause 1 attempts to set up a system where we look at inflation over the intervening period and determine purely on that basis whether the limit should be raised. However, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith pointed out, our theory is different—it is respected by the practice of the European courts and other jurisdictions: the basic determinant of what goes into the small claims track is not inflation but the complexity of the claim.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that claims against employers above £2,000 are taken outside the scope of this? It is right in those circumstances, where it can be difficult to make the claim stick, that people should be entitled to recover their costs in the event of a successful claim. Does he agree that making that change was a critical improvement to this Bill?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which should, to some extent, reassure the hon. Member for High Peak, some of whose arguments rested on damages in the workplace. The rise to £5,000 does not relate to damages in the workplace. As has been pointed out, it relates only to whiplash injuries suffered in a vehicle.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I take on board his point that the appropriate test for a small claims regime is complexity or otherwise, but will he recognise that there is a risk that perceived complexity might make claimants vulnerable to the operations of claims management companies, which do not have the high standards and good regulation of personal injury lawyers, as he rightly recognises? What safeguards do the Government intend to put in place beyond this Bill and more generally to make sure that we do not have a displacement effect from well-regulated personal injuries lawyers to unregulated, unscrupulous claims managers of the kind to which my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and others referred? What more can we do to safeguard against that unintended consequence?

Rory Stewart: This is an issue on which my hon. Friend has been very thoughtful in his role as Chair of the Justice Committee. There are obviously three things that we are endeavouring to do and we are open to more ideas. One of them, of course, is that, through this package of measures, we disincentivise claims management companies from having a significant financial interest in pursuing this type of case. The second, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is the setting up of an online portal to reassure individuals that they will have a more predictable, more transparent and more straightforward system for pursuing their claims in person. Finally, through consultation with the judiciary, we are looking at the issue of paid McKenzie friends. We are waiting for the judiciary to report back so that we can take action on that issue.

Ruth George: The Minister claimed that raising the limit for workplace accidents to £2,000 would allay my fears, but given that USDAW and other unions have said that this will actually increase the numbers needing to go to the small claims court by five times, it certainly does not. There are still wide concerns around taking cases against employers, as he will know. Will he make any assurance that the portal will be tested, and that it will be ensured that an ordinary layperson can use it before any claims are implemented?

Rory Stewart: Clearly two different cases are being made here. On the question of the online portal, a very serious group of people, which includes insurers and lawyers, is testing it. One of the concessions that was made in the House of Lords—I think it is a good one—is to extend the time before this is rolled out by 12 months so that we have more time to make sure that the testing is done and that the portal operates properly. That is a good challenge.

The point about injuries in the workplace is that that, I am afraid, is outside the scope of the Bill, which is very narrowly defined to deal with whiplash injuries. Indeed, new clause 1 is also very narrowly defined as it deals with only the question of a “relevant injury”, which, in this case, is a whiplash injury. Therefore, while arguments about other forms of injury and employment are very interesting, they are not relevant to the debate on new clauses 1 or 2.

Moving on to the next question about simplicity and inflation, I just wish to point out that the previous Labour Government accepted the principle that inflation was not the only determinant of the levels that the small claims court should meet, because, of course, the small claims limit was raised from £1,000 in 1991 to £3,000 in 1996, and then to £5,000 in 1999 under the Labour Government before it was raised to £10,000 in 2013. Quite clearly those rises were well in advance of inflation and were driven, as indeed was the case for European small claims, by the notion of the simplicity of claims, not a change in either the CPI or the RPI.

Even if one were to accept that there should be a relationship to inflation, the mechanism proposed in new clause 1 seems to be a recipe for falling behind inflation. In effect, the proposal is that an increase should only take place if there had been a rise of at least £500, and should then be limited to £500. It would not take many years of slightly higher inflation than we have now to end up in a situation where, over a five and 10-year period, the increase would be considerably in excess of £1,000, which would then allow for a rise, but we would then find a syncopated system that, very rapidly, would be falling behind inflation.

The more fundamental point is a constitutional one. This is not an issue that is traditionally dealt with through primary legislation, and it is not an issue that is
dealt with in the Bill. That is because increases to the small claims limit are properly an issue for the Civil Procedure Rules Committee, on which the Master of the Rolls sits, judges, barristers and solicitors, including the president of the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers—and representatives for consumer bodies such as Which? sit. That is a better way of looking at the proper limits than trying to find a way forward to include paragraphs (a), (b) and (c).

That brings me to new clause 2. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) quite rightly drew our attention to potentially vulnerable litigants, such as infants, children and other protected parties. He argues—that on this we absolutely agree—that they suffer the same forms of injuries as any other human, and are entitled to fair compensation and the same degree of representation that would be afforded to any adult. At the moment, that is, of course, provided by the allocation of a litigation partner by the judge concerned.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ashfield asked what happens if that does not work and whether an increase in the number of cases would undermine that system. We have looked at this carefully, because the hon. Gentleman raised the matter in Committee. Our conclusion, having consulted a wide range of individuals, is that we do not believe that. That would occur, but a number of safeguards are in place in the worst-case scenario. In most cases, an individual who is in that situation, such as an infant, would be represented by their parents. In a situation in which they were suing their parents, because the parents were, for example, driving the car, a litigation friend would be appointed by the court. In the case that they would be unable to find a competent adult who met all the criteria stated by the hon. Gentleman, including there not being a conflict of interest from that individual, it would be possible to appoint the official solicitor. In a case in which that, too, failed, judicial discretion remains to move the case of the infant out of the small claims track into the fast track, where the legal costs would be recoverable. Of course, judges would still have a very serious role to play in approving any settlement made to an infant or any protected party. That was why Lord Justice Patten made this ruling in the case of Dockerill v. Tulley: "I can see no reason in principle why a small damages claim made by an infant should be taken out of the small claims track merely because of the age of the claimant. It is also clear that the premise on which CPR 45.7 operates is that the normal track for damages by infants will be the small claims track."

That brings me to my conclusion. This very impressive piece of legislation has involved the upper House, the Opposition and civil society members throughout its Committee stages. The Government have made a number of very serious concessions to make the process more workable. I pay particular tribute to the Justice Committee for the pressure that it has put on us in relation to a very large number of issues, ranging from the online portal to paid McKenzie friends and vulnerable road users. We have now ended up with a Bill that does not do everything that was set out when the Lord Chancellor initially announced it in autumn 2015. Instead, with a series of realistic, focused and pragmatic compromises, we have struck the right balance between the protection of genuine claimants who have suffered genuine injuries, and the protection of different forms of public interest—in particular, the public interest of people, especially in rural areas, who need to be able to afford their motor insurance in order to move around. This Bill will remove unnecessary complexity, unnecessary costs and, in particular, the moral damage and hazard that currently exist in the form of claims management companies and a few unscrupulous individuals.

As Lord Brown of Eaton-under-Heywood—the previous president of the Supreme Court—pointed out in the upper House, this country is now known throughout the world as a haven for unnecessary whiplash claims. Despite a significant reduction in the number of car accidents and an increase in vehicle safety measures over the past 15 years, if not over the last three, we have seen a significant increase in the number of whiplash claims, which can be accounted for only on the basis of fraudulent and exaggerated claims.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 240, Noes 287.

Division No. 245

A YES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Doyie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Alian-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Bergner, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryan, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Nic  
Davey, rh Sir Edward  
David, Wayne  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debonnaire, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Ellman, Dame Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Farron, Tim  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Foster, Vevone  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Girvin, Paul  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollett, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kilren, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Maithotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachel
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McKinnon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulp
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thorberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Mr Martin
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brexton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbrow, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver

Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Stephanie Peacock

NOES

Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabircant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Fysh, rh Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greenning, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollbourne, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Civil Liability Bill [Lords]

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 2

Small Claims Track: Children and Protected Parties

“(1) The Small Claims Track Limit in relation to claims made by children and protected parties for whiplash injuries may not be increased unless the increase is to an amount which is not more than the value of £1,000 on 1 April 1999 adjusted for inflation, computed by reference to the consumer prices index.

(2) In subsection (1),

‘children’ means any person or persons under 18;

‘protected parties’ means any person who lacks capacity to conduct the proceedings;

‘lacks capacity’ means lacks capacity within the meaning of the Mental Capacity Act 2005”.

(Gloria De Piero.)

This new clause would limit increases in the small claims track limit for those suffering whiplash injuries to inflationary rises only, for people who are either children or people lacking capacity to make decisions for themselves (as defined in the Mental Capacity Act 2005).

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

Division No. 246] [3.15 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan

Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murray, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wating, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Williamson, Dr Andrew
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth

Answered. [3.15 pm]
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gillon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwoods Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Killick, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lukash, C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Sabahana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorran, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morton, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shepherd, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tamil, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Adams, Nigel
Afroli, Bib
Afrifje, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, rh Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Breereton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbrow, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chaik, Alex
Chishti, Reham
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverley, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Turiley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Stephanie Peacock

NOES
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, rh Mr David
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 3

DAMAGES FOR WHIPLASH INJURIES

3.30 pm

Gloria De Piero: I beg to move amendment 2, page 3, line 14, leave out clauses 3 to 5.

This amendment would remove the creation of tariffs for whiplash injuries and retain the existing system where judges decide compensation levels with reference to Judicial College Guidelines.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment 1.

Gloria De Piero: Amendment 2 gets to the heart of our issues with the Bill and would remove the whiplash compensation tariff system altogether. We are dealing with human beings who experience pain differently, who have different lives and who will all be affected by a similar injury in a slightly different way. We would not accept a pricing of insurance premiums that did not take account of whether we drove a Mini or a Maserati, and we would not accept a standard payment for damage to a car, regardless of its state after an accident. Where is the justification for using such a blunt instrument as a tariff to calculate pain?

We all want to stamp out false whiplash claims, but why should HGV drivers, firefighters or parents driving their kids to school be treated like fraudsters claiming falsely for whiplash, left with tariff compensation and no legal help? As Lord Woolf, the eminent former Law Lord who carried out a review of civil justice after being commissioned by a previous Conservative Government, pointed out in the Lords:

The effect of whiplash injuries, with which we are concerned, can vary substantially according to the physical and mental sturdiness of the victim. This means that the appropriate amount
of damages for a whiplash injury can vary substantially... I suggest that they are not suited to a fixed cap, as proposed by the Government.”

He went on to say that a tariff “offends an important principle of justice, because it reduces the damages that will be received by an honest litigant because of the activities of dishonest litigants.”

The Government’s proposals will punish the honest based on the behaviour of the dishonest, but how big is that dishonest group? The ABI said in 2017 that insurers paid out in 99% of all cases and that fraud was proven in only 0.22% of cases. Woolf decried the Government’s move to “interfere with the Judicial College guidelines by substituting tariffs or a cap, which lack the flexibility of the guidelines.”

He went on in speaking against the proposed dismissal of a tried and tested system of justice to say that the Lord Chancellor “is motivated, at least in part, not by the normal principles of justice as I understand them but by saving insurers money, in the belief that this will result in a reduction in premiums for motorists who are insured when they come to pay for their insurance.”

Later, he put it as strongly as simply saying: “There is no precedent for this intervention in the assessment of damages in civil proceedings.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1593-1595.]

He went on to quote Sir Rupert Jackson, who said: “It is the function of judges (not Parliament) to set the tariffs for pain, suffering and loss of amenities in respect of different categories of personal injuries.”

Lawyers who deal with such issues all the time have pointed out how people who are already suffering, and perhaps unable to earn a living due to their injury, will be worse off under the proposed tariff. They include experienced legal practitioner from the Tory Back Benches, such as Baroness Berridge, who said:

“I have met many a claimant for whom the difference in damages now proposed by the introduction of the tariff, taking some damages from four figures—£1,200 or £1,400—down to the likes of £470 is a significant matter for many peoples’ incomes up and down this country. I cannot have it portrayed that this might not make a great deal of difference to many ordinary people in the country.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1611.]

That is from a Government Back Bencher.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is making fair points, but it is important to take into account that the claim may consist partly of a general damages component and also a special damages component. Does she agree that if the individual had, for example, been required to take time off work and had incurred costs—or losses—in the process, he would still be able to litigate and seek to recover those damages?

Gloria De Piero: The tariff system would mean that somebody who today was entitled to £1,200 or £1,400 would be compensated with far less. I am quoting Baroness Berridge.

Alex Chalk: We have to be really careful in this debate to draw a distinction between general damages, which are for pain, suffering and loss of amenity, as with whiplash, and special damages, such as the cost of taxis or lost employment. Does the hon. Lady agree that special damages will still be recoverable in the normal way and that we should not be confusing the two?

Gloria De Piero: I am choosing to focus on the injuries incurred. For a soft tissue injury lasting six months, an individual would today get between £2,150 and £3,810 but, if the Bill passes, they would get £805. I am choosing to focus my speech on those huge differences. That is the practical reality of what this tariff system will mean.

There is another important principle. It is a significant step to mess with the proud tradition of an independent judiciary in this country, and the Government should not take that lightly. The Justice Committee, too, could not have been clearer in its criticism of how the tariff system will harm access to justice. We hope the Government will listen to the Justice Committee and eminent judges—and, yes, us—and accept this amendment to remove the tariff system.

Mr Simon Clarke: It is a pleasure both to speak in support of the Bill and, unfortunately, against the amendment put forward by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero). It is really important that the Bill is proportionate in achieving the outcomes we want of ensuring that the public get the protection they need from injuries that can be so devastating, while at the same time compensating them in such a way that we do not burden the wider consumer with unsustainable bills. Earlier, I spoke about the fact that premiums need to remain affordable.

Amendment 2 would remove the ability to set a fixed tariff for whiplash compensation in regulations. As I mentioned earlier, the tariff system will ensure that claimants receive a proportionate level of compensation. This will significantly reduce and control the spiralling cost of whiplash claims and disincentivise unmeritorious claims. As with any such tariff system, I can understand the concern that it may not provide the flexibility necessary to ensure that compensation accurately reflects the true nature of someone’s injuries.

However, the Government have taken a number of important steps to ensure that such flexibility still exists. First, the tariff would not be flat for all cases, but staggered, depending on the severity of injury. Secondly, in addition to a tariff payment, all claimants will continue to receive special damages covering compensation for any actual financial losses suffered as a result of their accident. Finally, clause 5 gives the court discretion to deviate from the tariff in exceptional circumstances and when it is clear that a higher level of compensation would be appropriate.

This therefore seems to me to be exactly the type of Bill we should be bringing forward. It is sensible, and it does indeed allow us to provide the protection that people need, without the risk of putting up premiums. I do not believe that amendment 2 would achieve very much, other than wrecking the central point of the Bill, which as I say is to achieve such an upsurge in affordability.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. Opposition Members have referred to the Justice Committee’s report, but has he noted that although the noble Lord Woolf was indeed critical of the changes in the terms that have been quoted today, the noble Lord Brown of Eaton-under-Heywood, a former justice of the Supreme Court, did not have an in-principle objection to the tariff system? Does he agree that the devil in the detail is what will be in the regulations on the exceptional
circumstances uplift and how that will apply? Is he, like me, pleased to see that there is a commitment to consult the Lord Chief Justice on those regulations, and does he agree that it is important that that consultation is real, thorough and detailed?

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend speaks with the authority of not just a Select Committee Chair but someone who thinks deeply about these issues. There are safeguards built into the Bill, precisely to ensure that we achieve the robust, balanced and responsive framework that good legislation should aim for. I noted earlier that the Lord Chancellor will have a duty to keep all the relevant legislation under review on a triennial basis, so there will be checks to ensure that compensation thresholds do not become wildly out of kilter. Indeed, part of the reason why the Bill is necessary is that the thresholds have been allowed to drift for a very long time without being amended. That has led to a more dramatic uplift than is customary or than I would ever hope to see in future. We want to ensure that we always have a rolling programme rather than dramatic changes, which unfortunately affect more people than a more staged mechanism would. However, that does not mean that there is not a case for acting, so unfortunately I cannot support amendment 2.

Andy Slaughter: I will speak only briefly, because a number of the points to be made in this debate are the same ones that we made in the previous debate. There is no logic or sense to the Government’s rationale; they simply want to minimise the damages paid to litigants who have legitimate and in some cases serious injuries.

The noble Lord Woolf has been quoted several times. The Woolf report led to progressive and now legendary reform of the civil justice system, so he very much knows what he is talking about on this issue as on so many others. He said that the tariff “results in injustice and it is known to result in injustice. Indeed, no one can deny that it results in injustice. There has never been a case where legislation deliberately introduces injustice into our law. It may be that it is only in regard to small claims, but surely it is important that we pause before we do that.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1620.]

I agree that the Government should pause, and I would say that there is an objection in principle to the tariff in this case. No good reason has been given why this should not be a judicial process rather than an administrative or politically affected process.

There is also an issue of quantum to consider. The proposed sums in the tariff are derisory for what are over-generous in this country. What we are doing is that many motorists are paying inflated insurance premiums that are awarded under the Judicial Studies Board guidelines that I know of—that the levels of compensation that are awarded under the Judicial Studies Board guidelines are over-generous in this country. What we are doing is simply taking those realistic—some would say, rather parsimonious—levels and reducing them by a substantial degree, so I think the point is nonsense, frankly. However, I give way to the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who will make a much more sensible point, I am sure.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about injustice. Is it not an injustice that many motorists are paying inflated insurance premiums because some people are getting an unreasonable level of compensation for their injuries? Is that not what the Bill is intended to prevent?

Andy Slaughter: It is not, because I do not know what the hon. Gentleman means by an unreasonable level of compensation—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: Please give me a moment to answer the first point, then I will willingly give way.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is saying that it is unreasonable because these injuries are exaggerated or fraudulent, or that people should not be compensated according to accepted judicial tariffs. Nobody has ever said—that I know of—that the levels of compensation that are awarded under the Judicial Studies Board guidelines are over-generous in this country. What we are doing is simply taking those realistic—some would say, rather parsimonious—levels and reducing them by a substantial degree, so I think the point is nonsense, frankly. However, I give way to the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who will make a much more sensible point, I am sure.

3.45 pm

Rebecca Pow: On that point, from the general public’s point of view, there is a consensus that people are taken for a ride over all these claims. Many of them are encouraged to go into this system of claiming when perhaps they do not necessarily have a great case. A great deal of money is made through the legal system, and people want to see fairness. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is absolutely right: most people’s motor insurance is going up and up to compensate. Does the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) agree that that is not fair? What we are trying to do with the Bill is to introduce fairness to a system that frankly—many people would say—has got out of control.

Andy Slaughter: I congratulate the hon. Lady on getting a helter skelter of nonsense into one intervention, with every prejudice and false statement that has been made in the tabloid press about these matters for about the last 10 years—well done on that. I could make a long speech dealing with the specific issues of—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!] We have got time, haven’t we? No, I will not. I could go into detail about some of the myths about whiplash and soft tissue injuries and what is actually happening in relation to accidents, the insurance industry and premiums, because I have been an observer of that for a long time. However, let me limit myself to a fairly narrow point.

I have listened to the arguments from Government Members, and they are just non-sequiturs, frankly. We have heard that insurance premiums are the issue. Let us imagine that we give the benefit of the doubt there, which I certainly do not, and say that premiums are likely to fall significantly and that that is a factor relating to claims rather than to insurance companies’
profits, the other activities that they indulge in and the way that their businesses are run. I do not accept that, but let us assume that we do for a moment.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) is no longer in his place, but he made a surprisingly illogical—for him—intervention. He said, “Look, people will still get special damages.” Of course they will get special damages, but special damages are what the name suggests—they are to compensate for specific items of loss. Why should the fact that someone still gets compensation for their loss of earnings or their medical bills, or something of that nature, mean that it is right to diminish their compensation for pain and suffering and loss of amenity? These are all non-sequiturs. The worst calumny of all is to say, “We are reducing the level of damages from slightly mean levels to absolutely parsimonious levels because of fraud”, which is exactly what we heard in relation to the small claims limit. So many members of the senior judiciary and indeed, of Select Committees, including not just the Justice Committee, but the Transport Committee, have said that it is plain wrong to say that because there may be instances of fraud, of which very few are identified, all litigants should suffer by having their damages reduced.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying about quantum, but I would be interested to know, theoretically, whether he objects to the idea of tariffs being appropriate for this sort of compensation. I remind him that Lord Brown said

“I am in broad agreement with the whole idea of tariffs for injuries, certainly for lesser injuries, and indeed even of reducing awards in respect of a number of these lesser injuries.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 10 May 2018; Vol. 791, c. 306.]

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that tariffs can be appropriate with, for example, criminal injuries compensation?

Andy Slaughter: There is an element of semantics going on here. We have guidelines at the moment. Judges do not pluck figures out of thin air. They look at the guidelines and hear submissions, or they would have heard submissions when representation was available—it seems it no longer will be—and they make a decision, but they have discretion around the individual circumstances of the case. That is a basic and fundamental principle of law, but one that we are deviating from. I cannot say strongly enough that that is wrong.

To add insult to injury—if I may put it that way—rather than taking the average in the guidelines and having a rough rule of thumb that someone will get a bit more or a bit less than their individual case deserves, or going for an average and calling that a tariff, we are saying that a tariff should be a tiny percentage of the current award. This is nothing but an attempt to say, “We do not wish to pay out money in this way. We wish to diminish both the ability to make a claim and the compensation paid.” Whatever one’s view on fraud, the massive majority of cases will be meritorious and honest cases in which people have genuinely suffered injury.

I will conclude with the words of the former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, Lord Judge, on Report in the other place:

“What I cannot accept is a solution which means that a dishonest claim is handled in exactly the same way as an honest one. We cannot have dishonesty informing the way in which those who have suffered genuine injuries are dealt with. That is simply not justice. There should not be any idea that an honest claim for a whiplash injury made by the victim of a car accident should be less well compensated than an identical injury suffered by someone at work.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1600.]

That is what the Government are doing in the Bill and what is so inherently unfair, and they are doing it at the behest of special interests. They may genuinely believe that there is a problem to be resolved with whiplash. I could dispute that—we could go on for a lot longer than we are today—but even if they are right, there are other, better and fairer ways to tackle that issue.

Bambos Charalambous: Is my hon. Friend aware that under the criminal injuries compensation scheme someone gets £1,000 for a whiplash injury lasting six to 13 weeks but that under this tariff scheme the proposal is for £470 for three to six months?

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend, who knows far more about these matters than I do—and more, I suspect, than many on the Government Front Bench—is quite right. He draws attention to the fact that there is no logic in the system.

I feel a bit sorry for the Minister as he has to push these proposals forward; he is normally a very logical and fair man. It is difficult to speak at the Dispatch Box having been given a brief of this quality. When parliamentarians of his stature and of the stature of the hon. Member for Cheltenham, with his spurious points about special damages, are reduced to this level, and when Government Back-Bench Members are hauled in here, as we saw in the previous debate, to make speeches only to be told to stop making them because they are talking such arrant nonsense, one does despair. I hope even at the 11th hour that the Government might take pity on us, listen to the wise voices in the other place and support us on these amendments.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): A number of the things that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested as being completely outrageous many of his constituents and certainly a lot of mine would completely agree with.

The Transport Committee, of which I was a member for three years, looked at this issue, and it was apparent even then that whiplash was a peculiarly British phenomenon. On the continent, particularly Germany, they do not have nearly as many whiplash injuries. I suggested at a previous stage of the Bill that this had nothing to do with the physiognomy of Germans as against that of British people. I made the point very clearly that I did not believe that their necks were more robust than good old-fashioned British necks. It was a flippant way of making a salient point: this is a national issue. In Britain, we seem to suffer from these injuries a lot more than people in other countries.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend has made an amusing start to his speech. Is it not strange that while the number of traffic accidents has gone down, the proportion of whiplash claims has gone up? Is it that our necks
have become flimsier? What does he put this down to? Do we not need to seriously address this issue, as we are doing in the Bill?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not an anatomist. I am not a biological specialist. I cannot give any scientific explanations for why our necks have become flimsier, or less sturdy, over the last 10 years. It may be related to obesity; I do not know.

This is, however, a serious issue, which has come up again and again over the last 15 years. As my hon. Friends have suggested, the number of claims has risen while the traffic accident rate has gone down. It is entirely legitimate for a Government, and, indeed, parliamentarians to ask what is going on. Something is not quite right. It is apparent that many people are making claims, which may or not be fraudulent—let us give them the benefit of the doubt—and clearly it often makes sense to an insurer to do a deal, as it were, and pay the money before the veracity or otherwise of the claim has been established, simply because the legal process would take too long.

Bambos Charalambous: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that by paying early, insurance companies are encouraging people to make these allegedly fraudulent claims?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. It may well be the case that the companies are paying early, and clearly if they are paying early, people will be incentivised to make claims. The hon. Gentleman’s colleagues, however, are suggesting that no fraudulent claims are ever made, or that only a tiny proportion of claims are fraudulent. Logically, the more that insurers pay early, the more incentive there is to make a fraudulent claim. That is pure logic, and no great subtlety is required to appreciate it.

We have a problem. I think it entirely legitimate for insurers to pay out in order to forgo expensive legal costs. They have to manage their books and their businesses on a daily basis, and they will take a hit—if that is the right way to describe it—in order to facilitate business and manage cash flow. As we have heard throughout the debate, they are quite likely to make early payments, and as the hon. Gentleman has suggested, the more an insurer pays early, the greater incentive that gives someone to make a fraudulent or insubstantial claim.

Bambos Charalambous: Surely the answer is to fight those claims so that they do not succeed, and send the message that insurers will fight them and there will be no easy money for allegedly fraudulent claims.

Kwasi Kwarteng: If the hon. Gentleman were an insurer, managing a business on a daily basis, he would have to make a call every single day on which claims to fight and which not to fight. Often, for reasons of cost, the insurer will simply pay the money, without regard to the veracity or otherwise of the claim.

Rory Stewart: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is also the serious issue of asymmetry of information? In the case of injuries lasting less than six months, it is very difficult to prove through any medical means whether or not the injuries occurred, and therefore very difficult to defend against the claim.

Kwasi Kwarteng: In his usual philosophical way, the Minister has made an observation that goes to the heart of the problem. I opened my remarks by suggesting that insurers were very likely to pay out on claims early. He has made the point that even if it were possible to test the veracity or otherwise, it would be very difficult. Given the nature of evidence and the question of how it can be proved that an injury has actually been sustained, this will often resolve itself into an issue of one person’s word against another’s. The Minister has backed up my initial argument in his characteristically pithy way. The whole process is expensive, and for an insurer managing a business and managing a book, it is much easier and, I think, much more tempting to come up with an easy, quick-fix settlement or payment.

As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) suggested, that in itself will incentivise and motivate claims that may be frivolous, which is a problem. He has eloquently described the circumstances in which fraudulent claims can be made, yet other Opposition Members are saying that such fraudulent claims are rarely if ever made. They are suggesting that all the claims are true and that somehow grave injustices would be perpetrated if, as often occurs across the judicial system, we were to set a tariff in this particular case.

4 pm

It is entirely reasonable to set a tariff on these claims. The average taxpayer and the average person who has insurance does not want to see fraudulent claims. Let us review some of the evidence. We have anecdotal evidence. Even on Second Reading Members were suggesting they were getting texts the whole time encouraging them to make spurious claims. Some Members read out the texts they were receiving from insurance companies, or from claimants who were making a great deal of money, to encourage people to make spurious claims. This is going on and to pretend otherwise is wilfully naïve.

Where we are is exactly where we should be: it is absolutely right that we should be setting a tariff on these injuries and that there is some degree of political oversight of that process. It is not right, however, that judges should exclusively be in charge of the tariff rates. There is a role for the courts, but there is also a role for the Executive, and that is captured in this proposed legislation.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is making some fair points. He says that this is not necessarily a role for judges, but would he conclude that while it may well be, as Lord Brown said in the other place, appropriate for Government to legislate for tariff-isation as a matter of policy, the views of the judges must be fully taken into account by way of consultation in setting what the level or quantum of that tariff should be and how it should operate and what practical impacts it should have?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My understanding given the nature of the Bill is that there is ample scope for a dialogue or conversation between judges—the judiciary—and the Government. However, what I am reluctant to see, and what I think many of our constituents and voters would be reluctant to see, is the power exclusively residing in the hands of judges. The Government have a duty of
care to the taxpayers and to people who have insurance to try to keep these costs low. It is very funny to see Opposition Members frowning when I suggest the Government have a role to play. They are on the side of the political argument that believes in wholesale nationalisation; they want the Government to control everything. Yet in this particular instance they are expressing surprise and bewilderment, and I suggest that is completely spurious and fake.

Robert Neill: Does my hon. Friend agree that the logic of his position, which I understand, is that if we are to have credibility in taking this policy decision, those savings must actually be passed on to motorists? Does he recognise that there has been some cynicism about that in the past? We need to have mechanisms to measure very carefully that the insurance industry comes up to the mark, because it has not always had a terribly good track record in the past on that?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that the insurance companies have in the past—I stress in the past—had a questionable record on some of these issues, but I repeat what I said on Second Reading: it is entirely unhelpful to bash the insurance industry or denounce it as a bunch of shysters who are ripping the public off. As I said in that debate, the insurance industry is one of our world-leading industries. We should celebrate it and be grateful for it: our insurance industry is a world-beating industry. There are not that many industries left in Britain that we can call truly world-beating. It is nauseating and disconcerting on one that is. It was nauseating and disconcerting on Second Reading—it has not happened so much today—to hear speaker after speaker on the Opposition Benches denouncing the insurance industry. They were scandalised that, God forbid, the industry should make profits, as though making a profit were in itself a moral crime. We should not become excessive. There is absolutely a role for political engagement in the ability to cap a tariff, to ensure that premiums are low. This makes for a very reasonable and equitable set of demands, which is to be welcomed, and I hope that the Bill proceeds on its serene course through our Parliament.

Huw Merriman: It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate, and I am proud to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). I freely admit that having a tariff system in place could well result in some people receiving less compensation, but that is exactly why I support the Bill. At its heart lies an acknowledgement by those on this side of the House that insurance premiums have got too expensive and that we have to look at measures to try to reduce them.

Let us look at the logic of the position. Cars now have much safer designs and there are fewer claims overall, yet we are seeing an extra 200,000 category claims, 85% of which relate to whiplash compensation. It strikes me as completely illogical to state that there is not an issue here, when the statistics are so counter-intuitive. Something very strange is going on. The analysis shows that it is impossible to ascertain whether these extra claims are genuine, because the nature of the legal system means that it is much cheaper to settle a case and never even consider any medical evidence or reports on whether there has been an injury. To a certain extent, we could say that that is no skin off the bone for the insurers, because the cost is always paid on to the consumer. I am surprised at the Opposition’s attitude in that regard because this is one of the principles that benefits the many—those who have to pay the insurance, which is mandatory—versus the few who abuse the system. I believe that the Bill is needed.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that my hon. Friend has a financial background. Does he accept that, if he were managing an insurance book, it would be very tempting—indeed, almost obligatory—to reach a settlement and to make the payments? Insurers are not being vicious or in some way prejudicial if they just pay the settlement. That is how a business is managed—it just has to cut its losses at some point.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is spot on. In the seven years before I came to this place, I managed the legal team that was unwinding the Lehman Brothers estate. In many instances, we looked to sue, but of course, we considered the cost of the claim and then worked out whether settlement was a better option. Settlement should always be a better option. For someone running a business, it will always be the better option if it is cheaper to settle than to pursue. All businesses operate in that manner.
It is all well and good for the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who is no longer in his place, to say that there should be a duty on insurers to take those cases forward, but they will not because it is not cost-effective. In addition, it is difficult to disprove those particular injuries.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is an emotional gain from settlement? Even those of us who are lawyers and enjoy the cut and thrust of the legal process know that bringing cases forward is a stressful experience for all claimants. It is important that we put energy and effort into making claims settleable at an early stage.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is right. When I was running the legal team, it always distressed me when we settled because, as a lawyer, I found the whole court process incredibly interesting, but those on the financial side insisted that we settle because that was the better business decision to make. However, my hon. Friend is right about the distress of individuals going through the process. Of course, insurers have to focus not just on the money, but on the valuable human resource implication—the manpower it takes to fight the claims.

That comes back to my point that it is not an issue for insurers if ultimately their costs are covered because the price of premium for everybody else goes up. It is no skin off the bone for them to settle, and that is what occurs. For change, Government action is required. Although I readily accept that a tariff situation is genuinely not to be found in common law, the position that we have got ourselves into means that we need to look at the system akin to the way that we consider the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which fixes the tariff in the same way. That is not unusual if we look at our European friends such as Italy, France and Spain, where similar systems are in place.

I represent a largely rural constituency of 200 square miles. I have many younger constituents who find the price of insurance too great. Studies show that, for those aged between 18 and 21, 10% of their wage will be taken just to cover their insurance. In a rural constituency, there is no choice. If people do not have a car, they find it very difficult to travel. The bus services are not as they were and, without a car, people cannot get from A to B or go to work. That has a knock-on effect because we have got ourselves into means that we need to look at the system akin to the way that we consider the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which fixes the tariff in the same way. That is not unusual if we look at our European friends such as Italy, France and Spain, where similar systems are in place.

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Kevin Hollinrake: Thirsk and Malton also has high social care bills. If we lose our younger people to the cities because they cannot afford to travel around a rural constituency, the balance goes completely.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The amendment drives a coach and horses through the Bill. Yes, of course it is right to clamp down on those who claim fraudulently, and the Bill will act as an incentive for people not to do so, but the ultimate gain is that the money saved will go back into the pockets of those consumers who are currently being overcharged because of fraudulent claims. Like him, I intend that we legislate on all our manifesto commitments, this being one of them, which is why I support the Bill.

4.15 pm

I have been a member of the Transport Committee for the past three years, and we have been considering the cost of insurance. We had a joint session with the Petitions Committee because more than 100,000 petitioners asked us to consider insurance, and the points made today, particularly by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, are right. We have to make sure that insurers actually pass on this payment, and we are fixing it with the insurance industry so that they do.

It is strange that some are saying that Conservative Members are in cahoots with the insurance industry, because I am regularly lobbied by the insurance industry.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What strikes me as perverse is that the original impetus for the initiative on which we are now legislating came from Labour Members. I remember Jack Straw waxing lyrical about the need to deliver what we are delivering now, and we are right to do so.

Huw Merriman: I lack my right hon. Friend’s longevity in this place to make such historical references, but it would strike anyone as common sense to look after the bulk of our constituents—our voters—by making sure they have more money in their pocket. We should all subscribe to that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Does my hon. Friend agree that the insurance industry in Britain is something we should broadly celebrate? This idea that anyone is in cahoots with the industry, and that the industry is trying to rip off the public, needs to be addressed squarely and rejected.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is right. Britain is the leading country in the European Union when it comes to insurance. The top 10 insurers are based in London, and I celebrate this international market.

Of course, the insurance industry is very critical of the Conservative party for introducing and increasing the insurance premium tax, so any suggestion that this party does everything the insurance industry would like us to do is not backed up by our decisions.

It is undoubtedly the case that our cars are now much safer and that design and technology mean that injuries should not be as prevalent as we are seeing. We have also seen the growth of claims management companies, which have driven and fuelled claims. Sometimes we see such industries moving on from one sector to take advantage of another—holiday insurance is a good example; the claims management companies have already moved into that sphere. Equally, I would like to see more done with technology to address the ability of such companies to contact me and my constituents directly. People register with BT in order not to receive unsolicited calls, yet such calls still come through regularly. I hope that the technology will eventually keep pace and close down such calls.
I have made my points more than once, and I absolutely support the Bill. Although I can see that the Opposition’s intentions are good, if the amendment were accepted, it would drive a coach and horses through the very intention of this Bill, which is to reduce premiums for all our constituents and to make it easier for them to manage and live their lives.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Although I originally studied law and was called to the Bar, I never practised, so I hope I may speak in the debate without being tied to any particular interest. This debate is increasingly showing a division between those on the side of personal injury practitioners, and those on the side of the overwhelming majority of our constituents who face the costs arising from an ever-escalating number of claims, of escalating value, for relatively minor injuries. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was right to draw the House’s attention to the remarks of the former Lord Chancellor, Jack Straw. If my memory serves correctly, he told The Law Society Gazette that he was in favour of banning compensation for soft tissue injury altogether. Clearly the Bill does not go anywhere near as far as that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: So a former Labour Lord Chancellor suggested that he would ban this compensation entirely. What on earth possessed him to suggest that as a policy?

Mike Wood: Reading through The Law Society Gazette, I see that Jack Straw’s actual comment was: “Whiplash is an innovation of fertile legal minds which has no real foundation in medical knowledge. Everybody knows the vast majority of whiplash claims are completely unjustified. I support any measures to eliminate soft-tissue injuries.” I understand that he was referring to compensation for soft tissue injuries, rather than eliminating the injuries altogether.

Hon. Members have spoken about the apparent paradox when we have the long-term reduction in the number of road traffic accidents, the increasing safety of more of the cars on the road and the long-term reduction in the number of deaths and serious injuries as a result of road traffic accidents, and yet the number of personal injury claims for whiplash and other minor injuries having increased significantly—it has gone up by 30% in 12 years. That enormous statistical increase cannot be dismissed as coincidental.

It has been suggested that the idea of a compensation culture is more about perception than reality, but how many of us have not had regular phone calls inviting us to claim for an accident that we have not had, encouraging us with the idea that a fortune was surely around the corner if only we referred the case to the firm that was ringing us up. I have no problem with solicitors—some of my best friends are solicitors, as they say. Indeed, many years ago my wife worked with one of the country’s leading personal injury solicitors’ firms, mostly doing administration on road traffic accident claims. But we need to look at the state we are now in. All the empirical evidence suggests that the initial intentions behind addressing no-win, no-fee claims for personal injuries have generated a spiralling increase in claims that are not the result of pecuniary loss—they are about not loss of earnings or quantifiable losses, but a figure being placed on pain, suffering and loss of amenity.

Previous studies have suggested that, contrary to what others have been saying, the amounts awarded by courts in England and Wales are significantly higher than those awarded in most other European jurisdictions for personal injury claims. When there is a serious injury, especially if the effects are permanent or long-lasting, or even if it results in disability, clearly no one disputes that it is right that there is compensation, especially for the loss of opportunity and amenity caused by that injury. However, shorter-term soft-tissue injuries do not really fall within that category. That is why it is proportionate for the Bill to introduce a tariff that sets out the amounts payable for certain categories of minor, non-permanent injuries.

Bambos Charalambous: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, under the criminal injuries compensation scheme—one of the Government’s own schemes—a person can get £1,000 for a criminal injury of whiplash? Under these tariffs, however, someone would get £470 for the same injury, except it would not have been the result of a criminal event.

Mike Wood: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but there is clearly a distinction between being the victim of crime and being involved in an accident, even a road traffic accident.

Rory Stewart: Does my hon. Friend agree that these discrepancies already exist, because the criminal injuries compensation scheme is, in fact, already an example of a tariff-based system? As those discrepancies have existed since 1962, nothing in the Bill changes their basic nature.

Mike Wood: The Minister, as ever, speaks straight to the point that bringing this system in line with the criminal injuries compensation scheme is actually making parallel systems more consistent, and it is entirely logical that they should operate on similar tariff-based systems. One of the flaws in the current system is that, as the Judicial College is setting its guidelines, the awards it uses for deciding the amounts in the guidelines are not the overall amounts that are payable in the event of a road traffic accident leading to personal injury, but are based on the awards made by the court in the relatively small proportion of claims that proceed to trial and are then adjudicated by a judge. The system does not consider the very large number of claims that are settled at an earlier date when the figure would tend to be lower.

Clearly, cases that proceed to full trial are more likely to be the more complex ones. This has the effect of institutionalising an inflationary element within the guidelines as they are reviewed, because the review is only ever based on those types of claim that actually end up being the higher awards anyway. It can only ever lead to an increasing amount. The impact of that falls clearly on our constituents. We rightly insist on mandatory
motor insurance. As hon. Members have said, motor insurance premiums increase rapidly. One reason why they increase rapidly is that there has recently been a large increase in the average amounts paid out for personal injury claims. If we fail to take this sensible action, those amounts can only increase, and we can expect premiums to continue to increase at around 10% annually, quickly putting them out of reach.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is making this point. What is his view on whether the Lord Chancellor should be setting the tariff? Does that not bolster what my hon. Friend suggests—that there is a role for the Government in trying to keep insurance premium costs low?

Mike Wood: Absolutely. Although I tend to argue for a slightly slimmer role for the Government, I do think that there is a place for them in this regard. When we insist on mandatory motor insurance, there is a clear role for the Government in ensuring that pressures on the price of that mandatory insurance are kept under control as much as possible. Having the Lord Chancellor’s oversight of the tariffs is one way in which we can ensure that the people who are already struggling with the escalating costs of motor insurance do not see them taken even further out of reach.

There is a clear risk of a serious moral hazard when it comes to escalating motor insurance. The more that premiums increase, the greater the risk—the greater the temptation, we might say—for some people to take the chance illegally to fail to take out motor insurance and to drive on our roads uninsured, with everything that that implies for safety and for coverage of third parties. Given the current high levels of motor insurance premiums, research suggests that around a quarter of 18 to 24-year-olds have been tempted to try to make savings by not taking out or not renewing their motor insurance policy—driving without insurance. Surely that number can only increase if the cost of motor insurance becomes ever more expensive and increases by far more than inflation or incomes.

As the real cost of motor insurance spirals, more people will be tempted to take the risk of driving without insurance, and young people are more vulnerable to this by far because their premiums are already so much higher. Such behaviour puts other people’s safety at risk and leaves them in an even more difficult situation in the event that they need to make a claim. The number of claims against uninsured drivers increased significantly last year.

The measures in the Bill are designed to keep insurance premiums under control, which is essential if we are to have a functioning motor insurance system. That is why I am not able to support the amendment, why I shall be supporting the Bill, and why I believe that the tariff system for minor injuries is absolutely necessary and must be retained in this legislation.

Alex Chalk: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood).

Whether we sit on the Government Benches or the Opposition Benches, the first thing that hon. Members have to recognise is that we do have a problem in this country; of that there can be no doubt. Other hon. Members have mentioned the statistics, but they bear repeating. In 2005-2006, there were 460,000 or so road traffic accident-related personal injury claims. Just a decade later, that number had soared by 40-odd per cent. to 650,000. The key must be concern that the circumstances exist in our country to create an unnecessarily fertile ground for spurious and unfounded claims. What are those circumstances? They include the fact that instead of challenging whether a whiplash claim is dishonest or otherwise unfounded, insurers will take a commercial decision to pay out, because that will be in their interest. As other Members have indicated, the effect of that is that ordinary people living on modest incomes are finding themselves having to pay more for their car insurance than would otherwise be the case.

It is a great mistake to say, as some do, that a car is a luxury—to say, “You don’t need your car; alternative transport methods should be satisfactory.” For plenty of my constituents, that simply is not the case. We currently have a big issue in Cheltenham with the closure of Boots Corner, a key arterial route through the town. One argument made by those who favour closing off the road is that people can get around on bikes. That might be okay for some people, but for plenty of my constituents—including nurses, people ferrying around their children, and people with disabilities—it is not. We have a duty in this House, wherever we stand, to drive down the costs of living for hard-working people and their families.

We have to be clear on what the legislation is not about. A lot of the points made by Opposition Members are motivated by the best of intentions. I have served on the Justice Committee with several Opposition Members, and they have shown great distinction—if I may be so bold—and argued vigorously and passionately for the principle of access to justice and on employment tribunal fees, to which the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) referred. But that is not what this legislation is about. It is important not to set up straw men to knock down. Were this debate about LASPO, access to justice and ensuring that people could get early legal advice and assistance, I would have an awful lot more sympathy, but in fact is far more restricted, calibrated and proportionate.

First, this debate and the provisions in the Bill are not about people who sustain whiplash injuries and whose pain, suffering and loss of amenity last beyond two years. If they do last for longer than two years, the case is that of course falls outwith the tariff system. Secondly, this debate is not about special damages. Let us consider a run-of-the-mill case in which somebody is involved in an accident, makes a whiplash claim because they have a sore neck, spends time off work and incurs taxi fees going to and from the doctor and various other fees. Such special damages would not be subject to any kind of tariff and could be claimed in the normal way. In other words, if someone was off work for, say, nine months, the mere fact that their general damages for pain, suffering and loss of amenity had been capped would not in any way preclude them from seeking the full extent of their special damages. That is why it is important to draw a distinction.

Andy Slaughter: I should say that I have secured a three-hour Westminster Hall debate on the LASPO review, access to justice and all such matters on 1 November. I look forward to having the hon. Gentleman join us and to his being fully supportive of my speech.
On this issue, the hon. Gentleman may want to address specifically the issue of the level of the tariff. I hear what he is saying, but what about the level of damages, which cannot in any way compensate for what are in many cases real injuries?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point about LASPO, because if I may say so he is on stronger ground on that territory and I look forward to attending his debate and making some observations. That debate truly is about a cardinal principle that we in this Chamber should all share: whatever a person’s circumstances, they should be entitled to access to justice. It would be quite wrong, though, to confute that debate with the one we are having.

On the tariffs, I do not suggest that this is the case for the hon. Gentleman, but there cannot be synthetic outrage. If someone has suffered pain, suffering and loss of amenity to the extent that their symptoms endure beyond two years, they are entitled to get whatever the judge thinks appropriate. We are dealing with claims that, although not insignificant, are towards the lower end of the spectrum. That needs to be borne in mind.

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Gentleman is right in saying that special damages are not included in the tariff. However, the point that needs to be made is that under the tariff system someone could, as he rightly points out, be off work for a very, very long time, but because of the way that the tariffs are set, their claim would fall into the small claims track, meaning that they would not be able to have their legal costs covered, so would be unlikely to get representation for their claim. That is likely to mean that they could have a big special damages claim that is never recoverable because they will be unable to afford to pursue their claim. Does he agree?

Alex Chalk: No, I do not. First, in any event, as the hon. Lady knows, if the person’s claim extends beyond £5,000, it will go on to the fast track, so they will be entitled to get that cost. Secondly, the concern that a number of solicitors raise about this is to say, “The really difficult thing that you need to claim—the thing that is hard sometimes to prove—is the general damages element.” That is why they have become so indignant about it. In fact, the special damages claim is rather easier to quantify, and I do not think that people would, in effect, be frozen out of justice. Thirdly—if this aspect of the Bill had not been changed, I think I would be opposing it—for the really difficult claims where, for example, somebody has been injured at work and faces, as I accept entirely, the added burden of having to take on their employer, the threshold does not apply in the same way. It is absolutely right that the Government have moved on that to ensure that anything above £2,000 means that people go on to the fast track.

On the hon. Lady’s specific point about the tariff, it is right to say that this is an egregious departure from anything that we have known before in English law? That is putting it far too high. My hon. Friend the Minister has already indicated that the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority sets that principle in any event. Furthermore, it is a principle adopted in plenty of other countries that are signatories to the European convention on human rights, Italy for one.

It is also worth stepping back to consider the criminal law. Before the Sentencing Guidelines Council, as it was then called, started to set its guidelines in terms of tariffs for criminal penalties, there was a concern that it would be intruding on the discretion of the courts, but in fact it has worked very well. Defendants, lawyers and judges have really welcomed the guidelines, which set clearer tariffs, because that provides a degree of clarity. Of course, it is not a direct equivalent because judges still retain some discretion within the guidelines, but it does make the point that completely open-ended discretion does not exist everywhere throughout the legal system.

There are other mitigating factors that allow me, and people like me, to conclude that these are fair and proportionate proposals. First and most important is the exceptional circumstances uplift. Clause 5(1) says:

(Regulations made by the Lord Chancellor may provide for a court—

(a) to determine that the amount of damages payable for pain, suffering and loss of amenity in respect of one or more whiplash injuries is an amount greater than the tariff amount relating to that injury”.

In other words, there is a safety net in circumstances where the law would otherwise do an injustice. That is really important and ought to give a lot of comfort to Opposition Members who might otherwise be concerned. The second reason I feel comforted is that the tariffs are clearly going to have the engagement and input of the judges. That is why Lord Brown concluded that there was nothing wrong in principle with a tariff system.

There are of course things that have to be got right. It is critically important that any savings that are derived from this are truly passed on to motorists. I want to ensure that constituents in Cheltenham receive the benefits. We need to ensure that young people who are setting out on their careers and need their car for work, for whom every last £10 is critically important, will be receiving these benefits. If they do, then my clear view is that these principles are sensible, proportionate and calibrated, and have a safety net. Even though—I probably ought to have declared this at the beginning, Madam Deputy Speaker—my wife is a personal injury lawyer, I feel confident that I can take on the domestic dispute just as I have taken on Opposition Members in this House.

4.45 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and to speak in the debate, to oppose amendment 2, tabled by those on the Labour Front Bench. I will add to the remarks that I made on Second Reading and in the Public Bill Committee.

This is a very important piece of legislation for the insurance industry and, more importantly, for customers of the insurance industry—our constituents up and down the country—who will benefit from it. As I found in my Westminster Hall debate on road safety last week, which I was pleased to secure, there is great interest from Members right across the House in matters relating to traffic accidents and the causes and mitigation of crashes. It is not a surprise to me that this legislation regarding appropriate compensation for certain collisions has attracted a great deal of interest and scrutiny.
Our debate in Westminster Hall attracted a range of thoughtful and personal contributions about specific cases in Members’ constituencies. That is relevant to this amendment, because many Members raised the importance of addressing this not just through legislation but, importantly, through action on the entire road network. I was pleased to see the report by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, in association with Ageas Insurance, which looks at a systemic approach to improving road safety, so that we can reduce the number of whiplash claims and, most importantly, the number of people seriously injured or killed on our road network.

I am grateful to the Minister for the clarity that he brought to aspects of the Bill in Committee. Although I thought the Committee was dealt with very efficiently and we got through it pretty quickly, we had a great number of interesting contributions from Members across the Committee. I am sure the Minister’s remarks will be similarly informative and comprehensive today.

I want to move on to safer vehicles, particularly in relation to whiplash. One notable feature of any debate on road safety and traffic collisions is the focus on how much safer our cars, vans and lorries are today than they were only a decade ago. They are safer by design, and the advances in building motor vehicles that cause much fewer more serious injuries on impact are hugely welcome. Indeed, the number of accidents has fallen by almost a third since 2005.

As the Minister noted in Committee, the percentage of cars with safety features specifically designed to reduce whiplash has increased from only 15% in 2005 to nearly 85% now—that is to say, the position is completely reversed. Whereas only 15% of cars used to have anti-whiplash safety features, now only 15% do not have them. That is still too high a percentage, but vast progress has been made. Despite the 30% reduction in road traffic accidents, the number of whiplash claims has increased remarkably, by 40%. Something does not add up, and the Bill seeks to address concerns that certain claims are either exaggerated or unfounded, forcing up insurance premiums at an alarming rate.

I have something of an interest to declare. As I said on Second Reading, as a young driver I will be particularly advantaged by this legislation. I have been hit by higher insurance rates, which are adding significant costs for people of my generation and for our constituents right across the country. I am reassured that there has been meaningful engagement with the insurance industry by the Government throughout the process of the Bill, with both Government and industry working to get the legislation right for consumers and focusing on how we can ensure that insurance premiums do come down.

As I have said before, Ageas Insurance, which is one of the largest insurance providers in the UK, employs more than 400 people in my constituency. It has very much given me the assurance that it absolutely persists in its support for the changes proposed, which will entirely benefit its policy holders and our constituents. Those policy holders have faced massive increases in bills, but they should now at last see some respite and reductions.

The insurance industry’s support for the legislation is shared by the vast majority of the public. This is not just about the insurance industry pushing an issue; it is about the majority of the public pushing for what they believe is the right thing to do. We are fair-minded people in this country and, particularly in Stoke-on-Trent, we are not comfortable with the idea of a compensation culture. While resolutely recognising that, where there is clear medical evidence, liability must of course mean consequences for those at fault, that should not apply to those who seek to abuse the system.

What will the Bill do? It will reduce insurance premiums for hard-pressed motorists by adjusting how the personal injury discount rate is set. It is not about stopping those who genuinely deserve compensation from getting the settlement they justly deserve. It is of course a matter of justice that we have a system of rules under which everyone plays by those rules, without allowing them to play the system.

It is very welcome that the Government are introducing a new tariff specifically to target the exaggerated and fraudulent whiplash claims that have driven up insurance premiums. The creation of a new fixed compensation level for whiplash injuries is exactly the right thing to do to address the general and obvious anomaly that the number of accidents is going down but the number of claims for whiplash is going up. Equally, it is the right thing to do to ensure that there are provisions to increase compensation in exceptional circumstances. That stands in stark contrast with the current situation, where financial compensation figures are negotiated by the force of will and expertise in the opaque language or legalese of the interested parties.

I stress that these changes are not about denying genuine claims, but about discouraging speculative or exaggerated claims and claims with no just foundation. Such claims have the unjust consequence of forcing up insurance premiums to pay claims-chasing lawyers. I am glad that the Government have been so clear in attempting to get the balance right. As the Minister said in Committee, the Lord Chief Justice should be consulted on the levels of tariffs, as well as on the percentage uplift for judicial discretion. It is right that this should be done in an accountable, responsible, transparent and predictable fashion. I am sure the Lord Chancellor will be in no doubt about the feeling of this House that that should be done. He is accountable to this House, of course, and it should be reassuring to Members that his Ministry has modelled its approach to setting the tariff on that used in other countries, such as France and Italy.

It should be remembered that the bone of contention is not damages paid out for serious, long-lasting cases of whiplash but the anomalous prevalence of minor claims. The Bill addresses that by ensuring that when someone makes a claim for whiplash injuries, it is backed up by medical evidence and the damages are proportionate to the injury suffered. It will also ensure that those who have suffered life-changing injuries continue to receive 100% compensation—that is a key principle of the Bill.

Clearly the current balance is not right, with ordinary motorists being unfairly penalised through needlessly over-inflated premiums. That does not seem the best value for taxpayers’ money. Without reform, motor premiums could continue to rise by about 10% a year, which is shockingly high and unsustainable for working families and, especially, younger motorists. The Government argue that the whiplash reforms in the Bill will restore a sense of balance to the insurance and claims system,
delivering about £1.1 billion of consumer savings every
year. That could mean motorists’ insurance premiums
falling by an average of £35 a year, with the high level of
competition that is currently prevalent in the industry
ensuring that it is the customers—our constituents—who
benefit by far the most. This cannot and will not, of
course, be a straight switch from a money grab by
lawyers to a money grab by insurers.

I want to go through some of the key things that the
Bill will achieve in this area. About 650,000 road traffic
accident-related personal injury claims were made in
2017-18—nearly 200,000 more than in 2005-06. The
Government estimate that about 85% of them were for
whiplash-related injuries. Those figures remain high
despite a reduction in the number of road traffic accidents
reported to the police and improved vehicle safety. The
continuing high number and cost of claims increases
the cost of motor insurance premiums to ordinary
customers and consumers, which was why, as has been
said today, the 2017 manifesto included a commitment
to reduce insurance costs for ordinary motorists by
tackling fraudulent and exaggerated claims. That is a key commitment for the Conservative Government.

The introduction of a tariff will both simplify the
process for genuinely injured whiplash claimants and
ensure that they receive proportionate compensation.
In addition to a tariff payment, all claimants will continue
to receive special damages covering compensation for
any actual financial losses suffered as a result of their
accident. The new measures will reduce and control the
cost of whiplash claims and disincentivise unmeritorious
claims. A tariff system is consistent with other schemes,
such as the criminal injuries compensation scheme, which other countries right across the world use.

Having introduced a tariff system, it is essential that
we provide that the Lord Chancellor must regularly
review the level of the tariff, as clause 4 provides for.
However, the Government recognise that there may be
exceptional circumstances in which higher levels of
compensation are needed, and I very much welcome
that. For that reason, clause 4 also allows a judge to
determine a higher level of damages. It is right that that
remains part of the Bill.

5 pm

In short, the Bill is about the system being fair and
about public confidence in the system being fair—it is not
currently obvious that the system is fair, I am afraid. The Bill will mean reduced costs for insurance
customers, who currently pay the costs of unfounded
claims, and rebalance the system for the emergent
compensation culture that has seen unreasonable and
exaggerated claims grow significantly in recent years.
Most people want an insurance system that has a fair
and just balance between claims and premiums. Hard-
pressed motorists and taxpayers in my constituency will
benefit from the Bill, much more so than any insurance
company, and I am happy to support it tonight.

Mrs Badenoch: I rise to speak in support of the Bill
and to oppose amendment 2. First, however, I will
remind the House why we need the Bill; we have heard it
over and over again in the debate. I know that other
Members have had similar experiences of nuisance calls
from ambulance-chasing companies, and many of my
constituents certainly have. As of this week, I am still
receiving calls from companies telling me that I had heard I had been in a car accident that was not my
fault—this must have been the 10th time that I received
such a call this year. Needless to say, I have not been
involved in any car accident then or since.

However, this debate is not about nuisance calls, but
about the incentives behind them, which are to encourage
unnecessary and, in many cases, fraudulent insurance
claims that are difficult, if not impossible, to prove. If we
remove the incentive for claims companies to act in
this way, we will get rid of the ones encouraging fraud
and probably the nuisance calls as well. So many
would welcome this. Because of the actions of these
companies, insurance premiums for honest, safe and
sensible drivers reached a record high of £493 at the end
of 2017. As other Members have mentioned, young
drivers in particular already pay over double the average
premium.

For so many of us, motor insurance premiums are
one of the highest bills we pay. The Government have
repeatedly expressed that their mission is to get a country
that works for everyone, and reducing costs for the “just
about managing” is one way to do that. It has also been
said several times in the debate that these measures,
alongside the secondary legislation, will reduce the cost
of motor insurance premiums on average by around
£35 a year. I know that many of my constituents would
appreciate much lower motor insurance premiums.

I also echo the points made by my hon. Friend the
Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about the strain on public services. At present, with a
discount rate of minus 0.75%, the NHS is overpaying
on claims for clinical negligence, which is adding to
pressure on the public purse. In 2017-18, around
£400 million in additional funds had to be provided to
the NHS as a consequence of the change in the discount
rate. In 2016-17, the NHS spent £1.7 billion on clinical
negligence cases. The annual cost has almost doubled
since 2010, with an average 13.5% increase every year.
Like everyone in this House, I am looking forward to
the end of austerity, and perhaps this Bill can help us to
get there.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is making an excellent
speech. She brought up the discount rate and I could
not resist the temptation to intervene. I absolutely welcome
changes to the discount rate, but would she like to see a
future in which, rather than one lump sum being paid
out for compensation for the rest of someone’s life, we
look more at doing this on an annual basis? That may
make the overall costs more reasonable and make it less
likely that investments will go wrong.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for making
that very good point. This argument was made during the
Justice Committee’s evidence sessions, and I am in
two minds about it. There are good reasons to have
both. An annual payment can help to reduce strain in
the long term, but for some people, the constant payments
would be a reminder of a particularly traumatic accident.
Perhaps we need a flexible system that can accommodate
both, depending on a claimant’s particular circumstances,
but I thank him for raising that point.
I do not believe we need amendment 2. The purpose of the tariff as set out in clause 3 is to simplify the process for those who have been injured while ensuring they receive compensation that is proportionate. Not only that, but claimants will continue to receive special damages for any financial losses they suffer as a result. Similar systems are in use in countries such as Italy and Spain, which have already seen positive impacts on both the number of claims and the cost of premiums.

The Opposition are concerned that the tariff cannot be varied according to individual circumstances, but this is not the case. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) has already noted, the tariff is staggered to account for the duration of the injury, whether that be between four and six months or, at the highest end of the spectrum, 19 and 24 months. Furthermore, clause 5 allows judges the discretion to make awards above the tariff level when the individual circumstances merit it. Amendment 2 seeks to remove this clause, as well as clause 4, under which the Lord Chancellor can regularly review the tariff. That would not be right.

The Government have noted that about 650,000 road traffic accident personal injury claims were made in 2017-18. An estimated 85% of those claims were for whiplash-related injuries. That is over 550,000 whiplash claims. As many Members have said, however, there has simultaneously been a reduction in the number of road traffic accidents reported to the police, while improvements continue to be made in vehicle safety. This is leading to increasing premiums for my constituents, and that cannot be right.

It seems to me, from listening to this debate, that Parliament is caught in a technical argument between the insurance lobbyists and the legal services lobbyists. I speak here on behalf of my constituents. I am keen to hear from the Minister how the Government can ensure that cost savings reach the consumer and are not negated by future policy proposals. Having said that, the Bill is an opportunity for the Government to bring down premiums and let people keep more of their own money in their pockets. That is a principled and Conservative ideal. Removing clauses 3, 4 and 5 would go against all efforts to help them and the taxpayer.

Huw Merriman: Would my hon. Friend also recognise that we have a good track record on this? A few years ago, when the Government made changes to the civil litigation procedure, an average of £50 was knocked off insurance premiums as a result.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. It is something I would have liked to say earlier, and I am glad he was able to make it for me.

In conclusion, the Bill fulfils a manifesto commitment by my party and should make it easier for genuine whiplash claimants. I will be supporting it tonight, but not, I am afraid, Opposition amendment 2.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). As we have heard, the Bill makes important changes to our personal injury compensation system, and although I broadly support its aims and measures, I would like to put on the record a few of my concerns and those raised with me by lawyers and constituents.

The Bill is long overdue. The last increase to the small claims limit was made in 1991. As we have heard, data from the Department for Work and Pensions reveal that about 650,000 road traffic accident-related personal injury claims were made in 2017-18 and that about 85% of these were for whiplash-related injuries—a higher rate than in any other European country. Department for Transport figures, however, show that from 2007 to 2017 reported RTAs fell by 30%.

Clause 3 introduces a tariff for compensation in whiplash claims. Lawyers who have contacted me and met to discuss this have supported the arguments made by the Access to Justice Foundation, which has estimated that the proposed new tariff would deny 600,000 people injured on our roads each year the right to legal advice when seeking compensation.

The question I have asked is: how does this value equality and fairness in comparing types of injury under the compensation regime? For instance, under the proposed tariff, if I experienced an injury in a road traffic accident that lasted up to three months—as I have in the past—I would receive £235 in compensation. Compensation varies across many sectors. If my train journey from London to Stockport, a route on which I travel every week, were delayed by two hours, I could receive up to £338. Under these proposals, the same injury would attract less compensation simply because it was sustained in a road traffic accident rather than in another way.

Rory Stewart: I am interested by my hon. Friend’s speech. She said that she would be entitled to compensation amounting to £338 for a two-hour delay. Is that compensation for the ticket that was purchased? What is the nature of the compensation?

Mary Robinson: I am talking about the compensation that would normally be paid by train operators.

It is important that we tackle whiplash fraud, but it is hard to explain to those who are injured that the same injuries sustained in different circumstances—for example, a comparable injury at work—should be compensated differently. Under the reform proposals, someone who had been involved in a road accident would be entitled to £3,910 for a whiplash injury lasting up to two years, but would be unable to recover the cost of paying a lawyer to assert their rights. Someone who suffered an identical injury at work would be entitled to £6,500, and would be able to recover costs. For many people, it goes to the heart of ensuring fairness that comparable injuries should attract comparable awards—if awards are indeed to be given—whether those injuries were sustained in a road traffic accident or incurred at a place of work.

If, as is hoped and predicted, these changes result in savings to the insurance industry, it is important for members of the public to see that the savings are passed on via reduced premiums. Concerns were raised about that in Committee, and I am encouraged that the Government accepted amendments that will hold insurers to account. As amended, the Bill places a statutory requirement on insurers to provide the Financial Conduct Authority with certain information to enable Treasury Ministers to report to Parliament on whether the insurers
have upheld their public commitments by passing on savings. The Government have estimated that these measures would lead to a reduction in motor insurance premiums of approximately £40 per customer per year. I expect the industry to demonstrate that savings are being appropriately passed on, so that consumers can see fairness in the insurance system.

Craig Tracey: Is my hon. Friend aware of the support for the Bill in its current form? A survey conducted by Consumer Intelligence showed that the most important factor in a low-value personal injury claim was a simple claims process, and the least important factor was the ability to claim back their legal costs.

Mary Robinson: It is absolutely right that people support reform of the system, and I support the Government’s action in doing so. I am keen to ensure that we can secure fairness for everyone through the Bill. According to the recent AA British insurance premium index, these reforms have already triggered a fall in premiums owing to the expectation that claim costs will fall, and only yesterday it was reported that motor premiums had fallen for the first time in years: last month they were almost 10% lower than they had been in the same month in 2017. That means that the average driver is £45 better off as a result. Consumers will be pleased with lower premiums, but they must be convinced that that is worth any detriment that they may experience should they become victims of traffic accidents.

We might not be having this debate at all were it not for fraudulent claims. I can almost guarantee that, at some point in the past year, every Member—including, perhaps, the Minister—will have been contacted by a claims management company, usually wrongly asserting that they have been involved in a car accident recently, and can lodge a claim. That is the worst sort of cold calling by a claims company. That is why concerns and aggravates many people. A 2017 YouGov report shows that more than two thirds of people are in favour of a ban on cold calling for personal injury claims. Cold calling is a particular issue for the vulnerable and the elderly, who may be talked into making fake or exaggerated claims. A Justice Committee report earlier this year stated that the recent restrictions on cold calling by claims companies “do not go far enough and that an outright ban should be introduced.”

5.15 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on nuisance calls. This Bill goes some way towards addressing the issue—there is no denying that—but does she believe that we could go further and hold the directors of companies who are responsible for cold calling directly responsible for any fines that arise from their activities?

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. That should be explored and people would welcome it because they would see that we were being positive in addressing this.

Throughout the Bill’s passage, I have met regularly in my weekly surgeries with solicitors and law firms that have been engaged in this process. They have impressed me, and impressed upon me their pursuit to help the vulnerable who are injured and to ensure that we have a justice system that works, is fair and protects people.

I thank the Minister for his continued engagement and openness with me and colleagues as the Bill has progressed through both Houses. He has been open to all my questions and I am grateful for the way he has dealt with them. I look forward to this Bill progressing. I know that there will be a spirit of openness and transparency as it does.

Rory Stewart: I again thank all Members who have participated.

Amendment 2 relates centrally to the core of this Bill, which is about the question of the setting of tariffs. We have discussed this with great verve and vigour from many different sides. The first debate that has taken place in the last hour and a half has been about the purpose of these tariffs: why we are introducing them in the first place. The reason why comes out of a perception of an anomaly. That anomaly can be seen either, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) pointed out, in terms of the fact that the number of car crashes is coming down and cars are getting safer, but at the same time the number of whiplash claims over the same period has increased dramatically; or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) pointed out, in terms of national differences. There are many more whiplash claims from Britain per head of population compared with Germany or France, leading to my hon. Friend speculating on biological differences.

The second debate has been about proportionality. That argument was made by, for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). He was essentially arguing, along with the former president of the Supreme Court, Lord Brown, that there needs to be a closer relationship between the amount of compensation paid and the nature of the injury suffered. As Lord Brown said in the House of Lords: “lesser injuries were altogether too generously compensated, certainly in comparison to the graver injuries”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 10 May 2018; Vol. 791, c. 306.]

The idea of proportional compensation for a type of injury was central to the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) reminded us that the former Labour Lord Chancellor, Jack Straw, had serious concerns about compensation for soft tissue injury and that this form of car insurance is mandatory, putting a particular obligation on the House of Commons when it considers it. But, characteristically, the most “sensible, proportionate and calibrated” speech came from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who, by using those three adjectives to define the nature of the tariffs, brought us, in a huge move, from jurisprudential reflections on the nature of tariff systems to a disquisition on rural transport in Cheltenham. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) brought it down to earth with a good focus on safety in vehicles.

Robert Neill: I cannot let the Minister move on from the important and significant points of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) without...
observing that he emphasised the role of the Lord Chancellor in consulting with the Lord Chief Justice in the setting of the tariffs. That is an important safeguard. Can the Minister tell us a little more about how it is envisaged that that will work?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. This is a concession that we have inserted into the Bill partly due to pressure from my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Justice Committee, and from other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson). It means that the Lord Chancellor, when reflecting on the nature of the tariff in a judicial capacity, will consult the Lord Chief Justice. That concession in the Bill, combined with the strong emphasis on judicial discretion allowing the tariffs to be uplifted, will be central to our attempt to reconcile a tariff-based system with the tradition of English common law. Through it, we hope to address some of the concerns raised by Lord Woolf.

We have discussed the purpose of the Bill, and the way in which getting rid of the tariffs as suggested in amendment 2 would undermine the central purpose of getting a more affordable system into place. We have made a number of concessions in order to meet concerns raised by many distinguished colleagues around the House, including individuals with experience of personal injury law and those with experience as constituency MPs of the honourable and serious work done by personal injury lawyers. I shall show respect to the House and touch on some of those concessions.

In the initial proposals put forward by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the autumn of 2015, the suggestion was that there would be no general damages payable at all. That was roughly the argument made by the former Labour Lord Chancellor, Jack Straw. We have moved away from that position and accepted that general damages should be paid, but we have suggested that there should be a tariff for those damages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) focused a great deal on the notion that the tariffs were somehow inequitable in terms of the damage that individuals have suffered. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said several times that we should not refer to these types of injuries as minor. I want to emphasise that the phrase “minor injuries” is derived from Judicial College guidelines, not from the Government or any political party. It is simply a long-standing convention to refer to injuries of under two years’ duration as minor injuries, and that relates to Sentencing Council guidelines for injuries of under two years’ duration.1

As hon. Members have pointed out, people who suffer, particularly from whiplash injuries of longer duration, might also lose earnings, have considerable medical costs, have to go to a physiotherapist and so on. Although those arguments were well made, for example by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) on Second Reading, they overlook the central fact that the tariffs will apply only to general damages. An individual who has suffered loss of earnings or who needs extra care costs can apply for special damages in the normal way. The Government propose no change to special damages.

On the arguments of the hon. Member for Hammersmith about the levels of the tariffs, we have attempted to achieve a reduction in the tariff at the lower end. For example, an individual who suffers an injury of under three months’ duration could receive damages considerably less than those in the current guidelines, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that, as we approach a duration of two years, the compensation offered begins to merge much more closely with the existing guidelines at a level of £3,600.2

In addition, as the Chairman of the Justice Committee pointed out, the levels of the tariffs are currently proposals about which the Lord Chancellor will consult the Lord Chief Justice. He will do that not just once but regularly, on a three-yearly basis, to ensure that our calculations on pain, suffering and loss of amenity reflect judges’ views.

It must be remembered that, ultimately, judgments on pain, suffering and loss of amenity are difficult. As a Member of Parliament, I have been encouraged by the efforts of parliamentary counsel, is that we deal with the discrepancy by inserting “or injuries” after “the injury” in clause 5(7)(a). I hope that the Opposition will be happy to accept that suggestion.

That brings us back to the central issue of the way in which tariffs are set. The hon. Member for Hammersmith focused a great deal on the notion that the tariffs were somehow inequitable in terms of the damage that individuals have suffered. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said several times that we should not refer to these types of injuries as minor. I want to emphasise that the phrase “minor injuries” is derived from Judicial College guidelines, not from the Government or any political party. It is simply a long-standing convention to refer to injuries of under two years’ duration as minor injuries, and that relates to Sentencing Council guidelines for injuries of under two years’ duration.1

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Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No.
Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to withdraw amendment 2.

On the basis of the concessions we have made throughout cases before the courts—which involve a duration of suffering minor whiplash injuries—the majority of proportionally undercompensated compared with cases in injustices, and greater injuries and suffering, has been an anomaly in law whereby some of the greater human body, need to be addressed—in other words, terms of automobile design and the biology of the claims compared with what would be expected both in and France, the disproportionate number of whiplash car crashes and, on a national comparison with Germany societal issue taking place, in that both the incidence of are at stake. The first is that there is a moral hazard and tricky bit of law. He feels that two important principles House of Lords give us all a sense of reassurance on a pain, but with the amount designed to remove the pain, but with the amount assessed to be a public recognition that that pain exists.

The former Justice of the Supreme Court, Lord Brown, is an important guide, and his statements in the House of Lords give us all a sense of reassurance on a tricky bit of law. He feels that two important principles are at stake. The first is that there is a moral hazard and societal issue taking place, in that both the incidence of car crashes and, on a national comparison with Germany and France, the disproportionate number of whiplash claims compared with what would be expected both in terms of automobile design and the biology of the human body, need to be addressed—in other words, fraud needs to be addressed. The second is that there has been an anomaly in law whereby some of the greater injustices, and graver injuries and suffering, have been proportionally undercompensated compared with cases of suffering minor whiplash injuries—the majority of cases before the courts—which involve a duration of only three or six months.

5.30 pm  
I ask the House to accept Government amendment 1. On the basis of the concessions we have made throughout the passage of the Bill, both in the upper House and in Committee, particularly with regard to passing savings on to consumers, I politely ask the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to withdraw amendment 2.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 243, Noes 298.

Division No. 247]  
[5.31 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradyshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cryer, John  
Cummings, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Nic  
Davey, rh Sir Edward  
David, Wayne  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debbionaire, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliot, Julie  
Ellman, Dame Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Farron, Tim  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frith, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Heppburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hillier, Meg  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Hollern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Jardine, Christine  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham  
P.  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Khan, Afzal  
Killen, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian  
C.  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
McCabe, Steve
Blackman, Bob
Beresford, Sir Paul
Baron, Mr John
Barclay, Stephen
Baldwin, Harriett
Baker, Mr Steve
Bacon, Mr Richard
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Mr Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Sneath, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, rh Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djoherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donne, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauge, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Giyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Rent, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernad
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadon, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul

McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Mrs Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz

McKay, Mrs Sarah
McKail, Andrew
McKee, Kiri
McKee, Kate
McKellar, Ian
McKendry, Mark
McKee, Thomas
Mckinlay, Craig
McKernan, Dan
McKee, Tom
McKendry, Mark
McKee, Thomas
Mckinlay, Craig
McKernan, Dan
McKee, Tom

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afotiam, Bim
Ainslie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Mr Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob

Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brecon, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex

Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernad
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
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Knight, rh Sir Greg
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Lamont, John
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Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Clause 3(2) may specify an amount in respect of one or more injury or injuries. — (Rory Stewart.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motions, copies of which will be made available in the Vote Office and distributed by the Doorkeepers.

5.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

5.53 pm

On resuming—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in the Speaker’s provisional certificate issued yesterday. Copies of the final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website. Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website, and have been made available to Members in the Chamber. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Rory Stewart indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE IN THE CHAIR]

5.54 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Committee consents to the Civil Liability Bill [Lords].—(Rory Stewart.)

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Lindsay, especially when we are in such privileged surroundings as the de facto English Parliament. As you know, I always think that it is important that we mark and commemorate these auspicious occasions when English Members of Parliament get the opportunity to express their true English political values and to get to their feet, en masse, to discuss and debate these critical English-only issues. I also like to make a contribution in these events, as you know, Sir Lindsay. I have the proud record of having taken every single opportunity when English Members of Parliament get the opportunity to speak when the English Parliament has met. In fact I have got the record—I have taken up something like 80% of the time in the English Parliament.

What surprises me is that when this opportunity is available to English Members, they cannot seem to bring themselves to actually consider and debate these critically important issues. There are important issues in this Bill that are English-only. In fact, the whole Bill is English-only, which rather prompts the question of why on earth we are doing this. I know that the Serjeant at Arms needs a bit of exercise, and it is quite an onerous responsibility to take the Mace down and then put it
back up. We obviously need an opportunity to see if the Division bells are still working, so the bells will go on and off, but then nothing ever happens. What is the point of this ludicrous session that we go through every time that a Bill has been certified in this way?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask what is the point because under the Government’s position, this English Parliament passes a legislative consent motion, but the experience of the Scottish Parliament is that legislative consent motions are worthless, and that the Government do not need legislative consent motions from the constituent parts of the United Kingdom to pass their legislation.

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend makes a good and valid point, because legislative consent does seem to mean different things in different Parliaments. Here, for example, we have the Legislative Grand Committee: an innovation of this Parliament to allow English Members the opportunity to put forward their own particular English-only issues and amendments. In Scotland, of course, we have legislative consent motions that require our Scottish Parliament to agree, on its own behalf, to legislation passed in this House. There seems to be a particular problem with this. We have our own Parliament that is responsible for legislative consent motions, which are now more or less ignored by this Parliament. Here we have the English Legislative Grand Committee squatting in the UK Parliament. This is the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but somehow it still operates as a de facto English Parliament and as the venue for this Legislative Grand Committee.

It strikes me that that might be a bit odd. I have a little solution that I have presented to this House before, thus far without any great success and without anybody really paying attention to what was suggested, so I will make one more attempt: how about English Members getting their own Parliament? Then there will be a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly, a Northern Ireland Assembly and an English Parliament. Then, instead of having all these Legislative Grand Committees, we can all come together in a United Kingdom Parliament that is responsible for particular, defined issues, instead of having this ridiculous notion where English colleagues seem almost to squat in this place in order attend a debate that nobody takes part in.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) rose—

Rory Stewart rose—

Pete Wishart: I give way to the Minister first, because I am particularly interested in his views about this.

Rory Stewart: I would be grateful to know how Union issues of foreign affairs and defence, which the people of Scotland voted in a referendum should continue to be dealt with by the United Kingdom, would be covered by the hon. Gentleman’s proposal.

The Chairman: Order. We are discussing the legislative consent motion.

Pete Wishart: I only have a few seconds left. I am surprised at the Minister, because he is an erudite chap who understands constitutional issues and the history of this nation. Quite succinctly, I will tell him what it is called. It is called federalism, which is where there are constituent Assemblies that have equal power and authority, and there is then another stratum of government, which would be the UK Parliament—

6 pm

The Chairman: Order. You did better than normal, Mr Wishart.

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, 4 September).

The Chair put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83M(5)).

That the Committee consents to the Civil Liability Bill [Lords].

Question agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

6.1 pm

Rory Stewart: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is with great pleasure that I rise to speak on Third Reading. This Bill has been a long time coming. The first suggestions of the Bill’s introduction date back to 2012, six years ago, and the precise measures in the Bill were proposed by the Chancellor in an autumn statement in 2015, more than three years ago. Since then, there has been a series of detailed consultations. I would like to pay tribute to the Justice Committee for its prelegislative scrutiny, particularly on the issue of discount rates. Perhaps the biggest tribute must be paid to all Members of the other House, who undertook a very serious series of debates, which led to a number of significant changes to the Bill that I hope all Members of the House agree are significant improvements.

Perhaps the most dramatic improvement is the Government amendment that ensures insurers pass on savings they are making and how much of those savings the insurance companies are making from their premiums, so that we can accurately clarify, the intention is that the companies not just may but will pass this information to the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority. Perhaps the biggest tribute must be paid to all Members of the other House, who undertook a very serious series of debates, which led to a number of significant changes to the Bill that I hope all Members of the House agree are significant improvements.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) rose—

Rory Stewart: I will give way in one moment. To clarify, the intention is that the companies not just may but will pass this information to the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority, and the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority not just may but will request that information, so that we can accurately explain to Parliament and the people how much money the insurance companies are making from their premiums, how much they are paying out to claimants, how much savings they are making and how much of those savings they are passing on to their customers.
Julian Knight: Will the Minister confirm that this is an unprecedented level of oversight, in terms of what the Government are challenging the insurance industry to perform for its customers?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is an unprecedented move. The fundamental idea is that the insurance companies are operating in a competitive market, so this is not simply a question of how much money they take in premiums or how much money they pay out; it is also about attracting customers, and in order to attract customers, they need to compete with one another on price. If they were not to do so, they would in effect be running a cartel, and the information they give to the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority would provide exactly the evidence to display that kind of unfair practice. We are therefore guaranteeing that the commitment made by 85% of the insurance industry to pass on these savings to customers will be upheld. I give way to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). [Interruption.] Oh, no, she was not intervening on me. I apologise.

Simon Hoare: It was me.

Rory Stewart: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Simon Hoare: I must say that I have been confused with many things, but to be confused with an hon. Lady from the DUP is a first.

My hon. Friend the Minister, perfectly properly and quite rightly, is placing very important obligations on the insurance industry. The FCA has a raft of things of which it has oversight. How is he proposing, alongside the Treasury, to communicate to the FCA that this House has the legitimate expectation that the FCA has oversight. The fundamental idea is that the insurance companies are operating in a competitive market, so this is not simply a question of how much money they take in premiums or how much money they pay out; it is also about attracting customers, and in order to attract customers, they need to compete with one another on price. If they were not to do so, they would in effect be running a cartel, and the information they give to the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority would provide exactly the evidence to display that kind of unfair practice. We are therefore guaranteeing that the commitment made by 85% of the insurance industry to pass on these savings to customers will be upheld. I give way to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). [Interruption.] Oh, no, she was not intervening on me. I apologise.

Simon Hoare: It was me.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is an unprecedented level of oversight, in terms of what the Government are challenging the insurance industry to perform for its customers?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the personal injury lawyers. One of the provisions in the Bill—I think it is clause 8—states that claims management companies will be regulated by the FCA. We already regulate the insurance industry, so how do we make sure there is no conflict of interest in the regulation of both those parties, which often have competing interests?

Rory Stewart: This is a very interesting point, and I am very happy to follow up on it in more detail. The nature of the regulation in each case is quite distinct. In relation to the insurance industry, the regulation proposed is to ensure that we have the financial information to prove that the savings the insurance industry has derived from these reforms are passed on to customers. In the case of the claims management companies, the regulation is to ensure that they comply with the law, particularly the legal changes introduced by previous legislation. In accordance with the suggestions from the Justice Committee, we are also looking at the advice forthcoming from the judiciary to ensure that we can deal with other issues involving claims management companies.

If I may, I will come back to the core of the Bill. We are dealing with a perfect storm of three things. First, at the minor end of whiplash injuries—the three-to-six-month end—this is a condition that, in effect, is unverifiable and difficult to disprove. The polite way of expressing this is to say that there is an asymmetry of information. Somebody suffering a whiplash injury will experience genuine and sincere pain, but that pain cannot be detected at the minor end through any medical instruments. That is the first challenge involved in this type of injury.

The second challenge is of course the level of payments offered to individuals suffering these injuries. The third is the level of recoverable costs which meant, in effect, that a no win, no fee process was operating in which people could apply to a lawyer to represent them and be confident that the legal costs would be recoverable from the defendant. When that is connected to the fact that for all the reasons I have given—particularly the first, asymmetry of information—the insurance companies are not contesting claims, we end up with a discrepancy rapidly emerging between the number of motor vehicle accidents and the number of claims, and between the number of claims made in the United Kingdom and the number made in other jurisdictions.

Lord Brown of Eaton-under-Heywood, a former justice of the Supreme Court, stated that he was “reluctantly persuaded that this provision is justified: it is surely intolerable that we are known as the whiplash capital of the world, so I have concluded that it is open to government, as a matter of policy, to seek to deter dishonest claims in this way.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1603.]

Kwasi Kwarteng: Does my hon. Friend have any idea why the situation has developed in which we are the whiplash capital of the world, as the noble Lord put it?

Rory Stewart: It is a sensitive issue, because of course many individuals who have even quite a minor road accident experience a whiplash injury and have significant pain, particularly in the soft tissues of the neck and shoulders, which can last three to six months in the majority of cases or longer in a minority of cases. However, the New England Journal of Medicine, which
conducted a significant study across various countries, concluded that the prognosis for a whiplash injury was significantly worse in countries in which compensation existed. In other words, there appears to be some form of medical relationship between the compensation offered and the prognosis for the whiplash injury.

How that relationship operates is a matter of speculation, but the following things may explain it. First, compensation and the prognosis for the whiplash injury.

of medical relationship between the compensation offered existed. In other words, there appears to be some form that they may not themselves feel are as justified as the claims management companies imply. That leads to serious problems, the first of which is moral. It is a problem of dishonesty. In effect, it appears that some people—we do not know how many, but certainly a significant minority—are being encouraged to make dishonest insurance claims. As hon. Members have pointed out, that is potentially morally corrosive to our society. We do not want to encourage a system in which people feel that they can make such claims.

The second problem is that the situation has had a disproportionate impact on court time. Lord Faulks has said:

“If there was to be a reduction for really serious injuries, I can imagine why noble Lords would baulk at the imposition of a tariff. However, we are for the most part talking about pain and discomfort of a relatively transient nature... So these reforms—quite modest though they are—are a proper response to what I would describe as a racket.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1607.]

The cost to society imposed by this compensation is disproportionate to the severity of injury.

Eddie Hughes: This might sound like an unrelated point, but surely the best way to deal with whiplash is to prevent it from happening in the first place. I believe that in 2015, the Government committed to spending £1.5 billion on 10 smart motorway schemes, the idea of which is to keep traffic flowing at a constant speed. If people are stopping and starting all the time, they lose concentration and are more likely to drive into the car in front of them, resulting in a possible claim for whiplash. The Government are dealing not just with the problem itself but with the root cause.

Rory Stewart: That is a very good point. Fundamentally, our prime obligation must be to improve road safety. Both the Labour Government and our own Government have made progress in that regard. In fact, over the past 15 years we have seen a 35% reduction in road traffic accidents, and, as we have heard, the safety equipment in vehicles has improved dramatically. Whereas 15 years ago only 15% of vehicles were fitted with equipment that can protect someone from whiplash, 85% now are, so people are safer in their car and less likely to have an accident. However, my hon. Friend’s central point is absolutely right. Very tragically—I have experience of this through my constituents, as will other hon. and right hon. Members—if someone who was killed in a motor car did not have a dependant, their family would be entitled to almost no compensation at all. Our obligation must be to prevent the accident from happening in the first place.

John Howell: Earlier this afternoon, the Minister will have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) give an example of how he was approached—hassled, in fact—by a claims management company. I, too, have been in that situation for a fictitious accident and I still get calls about that. Is dealing with this not one of the real ways that we will be able to prevent our being the whiplash capital?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which has been made by the shadow Front-Bench team and others: dealing with claims management companies is going to be a central part of this Consultation has taken place on this, and measures have been taken against claims management companies. A significant issue remains, which we are consulting on and trying to resolve—to be honest with the House, it is the fact that many of these calls come from foreign jurisdictions, so the challenge is trying to work out the best way to deal with that.1 On my way into the Second Reading debate, I received exactly that kind of call, encouraging me to make a whiplash claim for a car accident that I had suffered. For a moment, I wondered whether somebody had not put somebody else up to calling me in this fashion and whether this was not some kind of fuss. Sure enough, however, this is continuing to happen.

Julian Knight: Perhaps the company in question knew that the Minister was in for a bruising time in that debate. The absolute key to this whole debate is that this is about confidence in our legal system and in justice in compensation. The reality is that these phone calls and companies, which try to encourage people to make claims for any particular reason, are destroying confidence in that system. That is why the Bill is so necessary.

Rory Stewart: This is a really important point. At the core of our legal system there needs to be public trust and confidence in that system, and having an honest, proportionate, credible and calibrated system is absolutely central to the public continuing to have confidence.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to make one slightly technical point relating to the Bill, and in particular to the injuries mentioned in clause 1(2) and (3). Subsection (2) states:

“An injury falls within this subsection if it is—
(a) a sprain, strain, tear, rupture or lesser damage of a muscle, tendon or ligament in the neck, back or shoulder, or
(b) an injury of soft tissue associated with a muscle, tendon or ligament in the neck, back or shoulder.”

Subsection (3) states:

“An injury is excepted by this subsection if—
(a) it is an injury of soft tissue which is a part of or connected to another injury”.

I wish to pause on that point for a second, because we wish to make it clear, as the Government, that when we refer to the question of something being “connected”, we are not referring to it being connected simply by virtue of it taking place within the same accident.

I have the following on a formal piece of paper here, so that I can make my Pepper v. Hart statement to make sure that this is clear for the judiciary. In subsection (3), therefore, we have excluded those soft tissue injuries in the neck, back or shoulder which are part of or connected to another injury, so long as the other injury is not covered by subsection (2). The effect of subsection (3)

1.[Official Report, 3 December 2018, Vol. 650, c. 7MC.]
would be to exclude, for example, damage to soft tissue which results only from the fracture of an adjoining bone or the tearing of muscles arising from a penetrating injury, which would otherwise fall within subsection (2).

It has been suggested that the words “connected to another injury” in subsection (3)(a) could mean an injury resulting from the same accident. There is therefore a concern that a number of soft tissue injuries that would otherwise fall under the definition of whiplash injury will be excluded, and so not subject to the tariff of damages, simply by reason of being suffered on the same occasion as a whiplash injury.¹

This is absolutely not the intention behind subsection (3). Nor is it an interpretation that stands scrutiny. The effect of that interpretation would be to significantly limit the scope of clause 1, in a quite arbitrary way, based on whether a person happened to have incurred any other injury in the same road traffic accident. That is not the intended effect, and nor do we believe that the clause will be interpreted by the courts in this way, as it would not be the normal meaning of the word “connected to” in this context. To clarify then: the words “connected to” do not and are not intended to, extend to situations where two or more injuries are connected solely by their cause—for example, a road traffic accident.

Stephen Kerr: Since the Minister was taking interventions, I thought I would chance my arm and intervene to ask, as a Scottish Member, what discussions he has had with his Scottish counterpart. The Scottish Government committed to introducing draft legislation mirroring this Bill, which is for England and Wales only. Where is that Bill? I understand that it has not even begun to make progress in the Scottish Parliament. What has been the conversation been like with the Scottish Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. That is not the issue before us.

Rory Stewart: Unfortunately, tempted though I am to respond, as you point out, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not entitled, particularly following some of the comic interventions from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), to speculate on what the Scottish Government think they are doing. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, however, that they chose to withdraw from this Bill.

We have talked a great deal about whiplash injuries and how we have attempted to address them, and I am happy for others to return to that question in interventions if they wish to do so, but we have perhaps had less time to address another central issue, which is the second part of the Bill, on the discount rate.

Robert Neill: I am pleased the Minister is mentioning that, because although we have concentrated on some controversial areas, putting the discount rate on a more modern footing is important and largely welcome, as is of course the prohibition on settlement without medical reports, which again has not been touched on but is very significant and an advance.

I want to use this opportunity to thank the Minister for what he said about the Justice Committee and the way he engaged with us and me personally. We have raised caveats with some of the objectives, and he has met us on a number of issues, if not all of them, which has enabled those of us who want to keep an eye on this and hold the Government and the industry’s feet to the fire to adopt Lord Brown of, um, Eaton, um—


Robert Neill: That one. I ought to know him, as a fellow bencher of Middle Temple, and to get his title right. The noble Lord Brown has said that with some reluctance—because it is a balancing act—he can accept the Government’s intentions in this regard. The way the Minister has handled this difficult balancing act in the Bill has made it much easier for a number of hon. Members to do the same.

Rory Stewart: I am tempted to reflect on the question from my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee. There is a central issue and challenge at the heart of the Bill. Dealing with this perfect storm of problems—unprovable conditions, high payments, recoverable costs and the actions of the insurance industry—is not easily done through primary legislation, so I pay tribute to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides for their focus on not just the primary legislation but elements of secondary legislation and some of the requirements around it.

The only way this reform will work—the only way to prevent excessive whiplash claims—is by being very nimble in anticipating exactly how claims management companies will operate and predicting how this phenomenon could change in the future. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, that means putting in place an absolute insistence that someone must have a medical examination. At the moment, many of these claims are settled without anybody having any medical examination at all. There must be a medical examination, and it must be conducted by a qualified GP, who is currently allocated through the portal in a random fashion so that people are not in a position to be able to conspire in any way as a result of the kind of doctor whom they are given. An approved GP with the right kind of training, or a medical specialist of another sort, will then give a prognosis that will allow them to proceed in a much more straightforward way.

That brings us to the second aspect, which, again, is not primarily a question of primary legislation. I refer to the design of the online portal. It is important to ensure that, as cases move to the small claims court, people have a straightforward, intuitive way of logging claims. One of the things that we will be doing over the next year is testing and retesting the portal in as many ways as we can to ensure that it actually works.

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. He is being most generous.

I have been a great champion of the online work that is being done in the judiciary. I have spoken to Lord Briggs, and in my time in the courts, sitting with judges, I have championed it there. Does my hon. Friend agree that a very important element of the online system is the dramatic improvement in access to justice for people who are making claims? I know that a great deal of testing is involved, but does he also agree that the delay in its introduction is regrettable because it deprives people of that access to justice?

¹.[Official Report, 3 December 2018, Vol. 650, c. 8MC.]
Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has made a good point, but there is, of course, a delicate balance to be achieved. It is absolutely true that really good online systems can transform people’s lives and make access to justice much easier for them, but, equally, the Government do not always have an unblemished record when it comes to the delivery of IT systems. It is important to ensure that the system really works and that we have tested it again and again before rolling it out, because otherwise a system designed to increase access to justice may inadvertently decrease that access through the malfunctioning of the online portal.

Robert Neill: Will my hon. Friend give way one last time?

Rory Stewart: Yes.

Robert Neill: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend’s generosity.

Some of the powerful evidence given to the Justice Committee came from two members of the judiciary who spoke about the potential unintended consequences and adverse impacts on the courts of the inability of an increasing number of litigants in person to work their way through the portal. Will my hon. Friend undertake to ensure that throughout the ongoing work on its design, the issues raised by members of the judiciary will remain central to the discussions, and that they will have a full role in the testing and roll-out?

Rory Stewart: The answer to both those questions is yes. An important concession was made in the House of Lords to extend the amount of time for testing, so that there is more time in which to make sure that the portal has been properly tested by, among others, the judiciary. Part 2 of the Bill relates to the discount rate, and results from a very sudden change in the way in which compensation was paid to catastrophically injured victims. After 16 years in which the discount rate was set at a positive 2.5%, the last Lord Chancellor but one decided to reduce it to minus 0.75%, which radically changed what happens when someone is allocated a lump sum.

Let me remind the House of the formula that is applied. If, Mr Deputy Speaker, you were attempting to receive compensation for a projected 10 years of life, you were seeking £100,000 of care costs for each of those years, and inflation was, for the sake of argument, zero, you would receive only £1 million to cover you for your 10 years of projected life. Obviously, if inflation was higher, the real-terms increase in your care costs would mean that you would have to be afforded more, and the calculation that would need to be made in the awarding of the money would be how much of a return you could reasonably expect to receive for your money. If you could reasonably expect to receive a higher return for your £1 million, it might be possible to cover you for more years, and vice versa: fewer years would mean a lower return. The discount rate has been applied since the 1970s by the judiciary, and since 2001 by the Lord Chancellor, to enable the courts to calculate the fair rate to apply to a lump sum in the case of catastrophic injury. That sudden change from 2.5% to minus 0.75% meant that in the single year 2017-18 the NHS faced £404 million of costs. Projected forward at that rate, there are potentially not just hundreds of millions, but billions, of pounds of costs attached to the public Exchequer and through insurance premiums on the public themselves. Therefore, through the pre-legislative scrutiny conducted by the Justice Committee and the Government Actuary’s Department we have attempted to strike a proportional balance between the interests of often very vulnerable, catastrophically injured victims and those of society as a whole.

Julian Knight: Is it not the case that the mechanics of the discount rate as it was constituted by the Lord Chancellor before the previous one effectively mean that claimants are estimated to be receiving substantially more than 100% entitlement, and that is not what the system is about? We need a system that reflects current investment strategies and current investment returns.

Rory Stewart: This is a serious issue. The intention of the award made by the court is to provide 100% compensation. In other words, the intent of the court is to make sure that catastrophically injured victims receive the sum of money required to cover their lifetime care costs or loss of earnings. The best way of doing this is through a periodic payment order, which is why we have asked the Master of the Rolls and his committee to look at the use of PPOs. Under such orders, the real costs of people’s care year on year to the moment of their death will be covered; that is how the PPO operates. There is no need to give people a lump sum and speculate somehow on how long they are going to live.

In all cases we would encourage people to make much more use of PPOs. It is true that victims often do not want to accept PPOs. They would rather accept a lump sum either because they believe they can invest it and potentially generate more money or because they feel that were they to die prematurely they could pass on that lump sum to their relatives, but that is not the intention of the award. The award is designed to produce 100% compensation for their care costs.

Mary Robinson: We must get this right for people who have had those catastrophic injuries; their lives are changed forever. Getting this discount rate right is also important because it will affect how they will invest. What more can we do to ensure that they are not forced into, or tempted to, make riskier investments over the course of their lifetime, which will affect their care?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely right. First, we must bear it in mind that when looking at compensation for somebody in terms of their lifetime care costs, there are a number of uncertainties. First, the court has to make a judgment as to how long they believe that catastrophically injured victim will live, which is very difficult. Secondly, they have to make some kind of judgment of the future performance of the financial markets in order to work out what a reasonable rate of return would be to cover those lifetime care costs. For that reason, the PPO is a much more reliable mechanism. However, in relation to the question of the risks taken by the individual, we have made it clear both in the Bill and subsequent statements what we intend in the decision of the Lord Chancellor. This will be a decision of the Lord Chancellor acting in a quasi-judicial role; this is not the Lord Chancellor acting on behalf of the Treasury, which is why the Lord Chancellor before the previous one ended up at a minus 0.75% rate, which would not
have been the preferred Treasury rate. The Lord Chancellor is to make that decision on the basis that the individual concerned is a low-risk investor, and we would expect that individual to be taking less risk than would be taken by a traditional widows and orphans fund. In other words, because of the vulnerability of the investor and the importance of the return in covering things such as their lifetime care costs, we would be conservative in setting this rate.

We are confident that the rate that would be set would be better than the current rate, which imagines simply a gilt return, which does not reflect the actual nature of investing or of returns.

We are also clear that we are aiming for 100% compensation. We are not chasing a median compensation in which 50% would be under-compensated and 50% over-compensated. In fact, the Lord Chancellor would retain the discretion, on the advice of the expert committee and the Government Actuary’s Department, to be able to vary that rate. The judiciary would have the possibility of varying the rate in exceptional circumstances. Let us be in no doubt that we have an obligation to the public purse, to the NHS and to the public as a whole to control the costs. We have a moral responsibility to ensure that the compensation paid is 100% and not 125%, but we also have a moral obligation to ensure that vulnerable individuals who have suffered catastrophic injuries are properly compensated.

The Bill contains measures to reform whiplash claims and the discount rate, and it is the result of an admirable exercise in serious discussion in the upper House, in Committee, with the Justice Committee and through engagement with civil society since 2012. It contains a pragmatic, nuanced and calibrated set of measures that will deal with the excessive costs of whiplash and ensure that the discount rate is set in a way that balances the needs of our most vulnerable victims with the needs of the public purse. On the basis of that, and with great thanks to right hon. and hon. Members, I commend the Bill to the House.

6.36 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is regrettable that we are here for the Third Reading of yet another Conservative Bill that unleashes a Tory attack on the rights of victims and undermines access to justice. When the record of this Conservative Government is written—probably sooner rather than later, if the media reports are to be believed—the way in which they have entrenched a two-tier justice system will be writ large on the political epitaph of the Prime Minister and this Government. The cruelty of the Conservatives’ cuts to legal aid will be one example of that. Their wilful policy of making it harder for people to take on dodgy landlords or to challenge a flawed benefits decision or cruel immigration decision will be another, at a time when people need that kind of support more than ever. The Conservatives’ record on employment tribunal fees will also be something that we in this country will look back on shame. It is not only unlawful, as the Supreme Court decided, but immoral.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Burgon: I will not.

The Government’s intent was clear for all to see. They are making it harder for workers to take on unscrupulous bosses—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) wishes to speak for the insurance industry, he can do so. Step up!

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was not going to speak for the insurance industry. I was going to ask whether he welcomed the fact that the Bill will lower the price of insurance for consumers. Does he not welcome that?

Richard Burgon: There is absolutely no guarantee of that happening as a result of the Bill. That is not its real purpose. It actually undermines access to justice. As I said on Second Reading, this is yet another attack by the Government on our justice system and on the vulnerable. It is an attack that will, in practice, enrich the Conservatives’ friends in the insurance industry—[Interruption.] As we can hear, Conservative Members do not like that allegation, and they did not like it when I made it on Second Reading. Maybe it touches a nerve.

The Government had a chance to disprove it by their actions, by backing amendments that would have ensured that the Bill would not simply line the pockets of the insurers, but they did not do that.

In their media briefing, the Government claim that the Bill is about cutting the number of fraudulent whiplash claims. Of course, no one would disagree with doing that, and had the Government taken measures that did that in reality and simply stopped there, they would undoubtedly have built a broad consensus and the Bill would have been uncontentious. They did not do that, however. Instead, they pressed on with measures that will penalise the many. That, alongside their dire record on access to justice, is why we still believe that these reforms are a smokescreen. I know that there are many Conservative Members who pride themselves on defending our justice system, on upholding the rule of law and on promoting access to justice. Today is the day for those Members to show that they put their commitment to those important principles above narrow party interest by rejecting the unjust proposals.

The Bill started in the Lords, where it faced substantial opposition, not only from Labour Members or Members representing other political parties, but pre-eminent legal experts, including former Lord Chief Justices, who expressed their concerns about the Bill’s impact on access to justice and the independence of the judiciary. The Government only narrowly defeated amendments—similar to those we have discussed today—that would have fundamentally altered the Bill for the better. Since then, they have not taken the opportunity to listen, not even to those pre-eminent legal experts. They have not tried to negotiate or to remove the barriers to justice that define the Bill. For those reasons and others that I will set out, Labour Members will vote against it.

Before addressing the Bill’s provisions, I wish to place on record other elements of the package of reforms that are intended to be passed through statutory instruments. Through that route, the Government want to increase the small claims limit from £1,000 to £2,000 in all cases and from £1,000 to £5,000 in road traffic accident cases. That will make it much harder for workers to get compensation for workplace injuries, and for genuinely
injured people to get a fair settlement. A significantly greater number of claims will be dealt with through the small claims procedure, whereby no legal costs are usually awarded, even in successful claims.

When legal fees are not covered, tens of thousands of working people will simply be priced out of obtaining legal assistance, resulting in many pulling, dropping or not pursuing their cases. Of course, others, determined to secure justice, will fight on, but by representing themselves, at a massive disadvantage. An insurance company will be served by a legal expert fighting their case. The victim will be left to try to navigate a complicated legal procedure, placing greater pressure on our already overstrained courts. Some will choose to pay their legal fees out of their compensation, but then, in practice, they will be compensated less than a court found appropriate. As always, the wealthy will be able to afford the best legal advice and the rest will have to suffer.

Justice for the many, not the few is mere rhetoric for the Government. In reality, it is justice for the few, not the many. Is that why the Government are trying to sneak measures through the back door rather than putting them in the Bill so that they could be debated and amended? That is a cowardly attack on workers’ rights, pushed through without real debate or scrutiny.

I want to give some real-life examples of people affected by the reforms because far too often their voices are not heard in this place.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently say to the shadow Secretary of State, who has come on later than he might have expected to speak—the Minister was within his rights to speak for an unusually long time for Third Reading—that the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) indicated to me several hours ago that she wished to contribute on Third Reading. It would be most unfortunate if there were not an opportunity for Back-Bench Members to speak. I am not blaming the hon. Gentleman, but I ask him whether he might take account of the interest on both sides of the House.

Richard Burgon: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Those people include a driver, working to take disabled people to and from a day centre, who, because he had not been properly trained, fell off the vehicle while assisting a wheelchair user and suffered a back injury. They include a cleaner in a hospital who, while mopping the floor, went to pick up some papers and pricked her finger on an unsafely discarded needle. She suffered a psychological and physical injury. Just imagine the fear she must have felt as she waited for the test results.

Those are examples of cases that have been sent to my office, and of real people who would be penalised by the new system. Those are the people whose voices the Government are content to drown out with their rhetoric that labels people fraudsters and says that they are on the make when they are anything but.

When we consider the Bill, we should not forget that there was a 90% drop-off in employment tribunal claims when employment tribunal fees came into effect. Something similar could happen again with personal injury cases, with genuine victims priced out of justice and deterred from pursuing a claim for an injury that was not their fault.

It is not only Labour who oppose this Conservative attack on access to justice. The Justice Committee has explained that “increasing the small claims limit for personal injury creates significant access to justice concerns.”

We agree with the Justice Committee and the recommendation of the Lord Justice Jackson review that the small claims limit should be increased in line with inflation, which would mean a rise to £1,500, not the £2,000 currently proposed. We have repeatedly tabled amendments to the Bill, and it is a shame that the Government have not listened. We have also made clear our position on tariffs, and it is a shame that the Government have not responded in a meaningful way to those amendments.

I am conscious that Mr Speaker has asked that I shortly draw my remarks to a conclusion, but I urge every Member of this House to look at the chart produced by the House of Commons Library at page 30 of the briefing and ask themselves whether this is just. What does the chart show? It shows that compensation for an injury lasting up to six months will fall to a fixed £470, down from the current average of £2,150—down by three quarters. Compensation for an injury lasting 10 to 12 months will be £1,250, down from the current average of £3,100—down 60%. Compensation for an injury lasting 16 to 18 months will be £2790, down from £3,950—down by 30%. Is that what the Conservatives mean by justice?

Injured people who have done nothing wrong are losing out and being placed at a huge disadvantage. If Conservative Members do not want to take Labour’s word for it, they should at least think very carefully about what was said in the House of Lords. The point has already been made that this Bill undermines the independence of the judiciary with the tariff system. We have commented on the definition of whiplash and on the fact that the Government are making out that fraud is taking place on an industrial scale. Do something about cold calling from claims management companies; do not target injured people.

Why not exempt children? People outside this place will not believe that the Government did not concede on our common-sense amendment and have refused to budge on the discount rate.

The central purpose of the Bill is to tip the scales of justice against injured people and in favour of insurance companies’ profits. The Conservatives have shown that this is about lining the pockets of insurance companies by refusing to vote for Labour’s considered amendments, which would have protected vulnerable people and safeguarded fair treatment for victims. This attack on justice is not the first by this Government since 2010—after legal aid and employment tribunal fees—and I fear it will not be the last Tory attack on access to justice.

The wider measures that the Conservatives plan to introduce alongside the Bill will leave tens of thousands of people unable to enforce their legal rights. The Bill may well turn out to be the thin end of the wedge for yet more restrictions on justice in all personal injury cases.

If it passes, it will be celebrated as a great victory by the insurance companies in whose interests it has been conceived and drafted, and it will be ordinary people, whose rights are gradually chipped away, who pay the price. That is why Labour will be voting against Third Reading tonight.
Eddie Hughes: It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), although I was slightly concerned that, as he reached his peroration, a sudden stop in his speaking might have caused some whiplash to himself, but he seems to have escaped from the Dispatch Box unaffected.

The Joseph Malins poem “The Ambulance down in the Valley” tells the story of a village on a cliff edge and, instead of putting up a fence around the cliff edge, the residents decide to put an ambulance down in the valley to treat people when they fall and are injured at the bottom, but that is not this Conservative Government’s approach.

The Government announced in 2015 that they were investing £1.5 billion in smart motorways to help to alleviate the stop-start traffic that is so often the cause of collisions that result in whiplash. Although I am sure you and I are not prone to this, Mr Speaker, lesser mortals than us occasionally use their mobile phone while driving, and this terrible distraction can also lead to accidents that cause whiplash. So what have this Government done about it? In 2017 they increased the penalty for those caught using a mobile phone while driving to six points and a fine of £200. For those caught a second time, the penalty rises to 12 points, a possible ban and a possible £1,000 fine. So it is important that we do not just talk about dealing with the problem of whiplash—how about we try to alleviate it or remove it in the first place? That is what this Government are doing.

This Government are also making sure that we look after the just about managing. In my constituency, which I understand is the most deprived one represented by a Conservative MP, every pound these people have matters to them; it is incredibly important. So if this Bill can go some way to reducing insurance premiums, surely that is to be valued. I have heard the figure of £35 million mentioned. Some people might consider that to be insignificant, but when someone is on a low salary, as people in my constituency are, of course every pound matters.

That is not the only thing we have done. When I think about my constituents tuning into Parliament TV, as I am sure they often do at 10 to 7 on a Tuesday evening, I often think they will be considering the debate in isolation. So my job, as their MP, is to try to bring some context to the discussion. They will think, “This is good. I am glad we are introducing this policy that might help to reduce my insurance premium. But what else are you doing on our behalf, Eddie?” I would say, “Well, I am part of the Government that increased the tax-free allowance to £11,850 last year.” To people in my constituency on an average salary of £27,000, that is a hugely significant difference. What else did we do? We increased the minimum wage to £7.83, which has helped 2 million workers. Therefore, we need to consider this in context.

It is so important that we have the injury tariff in this Bill, because that will give us the opportunity to streamline claims and lower premiums, with the hope that that will then be passed on to my constituents. There are a number of things to be valued in the Bill, all of them good Conservative principles. They are just one part of a theme that runs through this Parliament, which is about looking after all the people of the United Kingdom.
that despite the significant hit to our business—Members
can check my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial
Interests—because it is absolutely the right thing to do.
We should look after the interests of consumers and
make sure that their interests are fairly represented.

There are other areas in which we seek to legislate,
such as leasehold reform to make sure that people do
not find that they are paying unfair charges for leasehold
properties. That is another instance of how we are
trying to drive down the costs of living for our consumers.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)
indicated from a sedentary position that he questioned
the relevance of my hon. Friend’s points about the fact
that we are trying to drive up the standard of living and
reduce the costs of living, but it was absolutely relevant,
as this is a key strategy of the Government. We want to
make sure that we reduce the cost of living and increase
the standard of living.

The Bill also, of course, fulfils a manifesto commitment.
We were clear in our 2017 manifesto that we would
deliver on the promise to reduce insurance costs, and
that is what this is all about. We are still making sure
that people get fair compensation, but we are reducing
car insurance costs for the majority. That, along with
simplifying the system, is the principle of this Bill.

It is very disturbing to hear my hon. Friend’s comment
that this country is the whiplash capital of the world. It
is therefore only right that we take action in this area
and try to reduce the excessive costs of whiplash
compensation, which do, of course, affect us all. This
is not about saying that we will not give people fair and
appropriate compensation when accidents happen, but
it is about clamping down on the worst excesses. With a
40% increase in the number of claims since 2005-06, it is
only right, when our roads are actually safer, that we
make sure that any compensation paid for accidents on
the road is commensurate with the injury itself.

It is absolutely right that we stand up for genuine
claimants, but we must provide fair compensation for
those claimants. The Opposition’s amendment 2 was
simply a wrecking amendment. It is clear what this Bill
is about, and that amendment would have hit right at its
heart. Without being able to control the tariffs for
compensation, the Bill would have been pointless. I
guess that it will not be the last wrecking amendment
that we will see in this place over the next few months,
but it is absolutely right that this Bill, which implements
a manifesto commitment, passes through the House.

It is also right that we try to make sure that insurers
pass on the savings from which they will benefit as a
result of the Bill. It is right, too, that there is clear
supervision of the rules to make sure that those savings
are passed on to the consumer.

Let me briefly touch on claims management companies.
As my hon. Friend pointed out, despite the fact that
many have a bad reputation, they do a very good job in
making sure that, when compensation is due, that
compensation is paid. I have slight concerns that these
claims management companies will now come under
the auspices of the Financial Conduct Authority. Hon.
Members will recognise that much of the work that I
have done in this place has had the aim of trying to hold
the banks to account for some of their worst excesses,
particularly against small businesses, following the financial
crash in 2008, but the regulator has seemed incapable of
doing that in many cases. Many people think that the
regulator is too close to the banking sector, and I am
slightly concerned that it is regulating both ends of the
process.

7 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, 4 September).
The Chair put forthwith the Question already proposed
from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E.), That the Bill
be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 238.

Division No. 248] [7 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carlridge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey

Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dods, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey
M.
Deroriss, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Dudridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr
Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Ewennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Tellers for the Ayes: Michelle Donelan and Mims Davies

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Criddsdon, Jon
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurist, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward

Tellers for the NOES:

Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efferd, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrer, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godschall, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: We come now to a number of motions that would, if objected to, be subject to the deferred Division procedure. I would like to take motion 3 first, and on its own.

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

Electricity

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.—[Iain Stewart.]

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 24 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 4 to 8 together.

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

Exiting the European Union (Fees and Charges)

That the draft Department for Transport (Fees) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

Local Government

That the draft Newcastle Upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland Combined Authority (Establishment and Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.

Armed Forces

That the draft Armed Forces (Terms of Service) (Amendments Relating to Flexible Working) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 July, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Civil Aviation)

That the draft Civil Aviation (Insurance) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Merchant Shipping)

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Monitoring, Reporting and Verification of Carbon Dioxide Emissions) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—[Iain Stewart.]

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: We come to motion 9. Not moved.
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice that the Government decided not to move motion 9 on time limits on speeches. I was ready to object to it, despite being a member of the Procedure Committee, because I think that it affects intimately the life of many Members of Parliament.

I want to get your advice, Mr Speaker, which is why I think this is a genuine point of order. If I had simply objected to the motion, presumably there would have been a deferred Division, but what I would really like is a debate, because I think that Members are very interested in time limits on speeches. How can we get a debate about this on the Floor of the House?

Mr Speaker: Repeated objection could secure the outcome that the hon. Gentleman seeks. I should just say, for the purposes of clarification, that the motion in question was not deferrable. If memory serves me correctly, motions 3 to 8 were potentially deferrable, but motion 9, which excited the hon. Gentleman to the point that he wished to argue against it and which was not moved by the Government, was not a motion subject to a deferred Division. It was what is known in the trade—not least by our previously bewigged friends who advise the Chair—as a “nod or nothing”, which means that it proceeds on the basis that nobody objects to it, but if somebody objects to it, it does not proceed. If it comes forward on the same basis again and the hon. Gentleman objects—and possibly even without it coming forward on that basis again—time could well be found for a debate. At that point, he would be able to explain, doubtless eloquently and possibly at length, why he was opposed to it. I hope that that is helpful to him, and when he repairs home, he can tell Lady Leigh all about it.

PETITIONS

Green Deal Scheme

7.19 pm
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on the green deal scheme on behalf of the residents of North Ayrshire and Arran. It involves the Government-backed scheme called Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems, or HELMS.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North Ayrshire and Arran

Declares that the Government backed Green Deal Scheme has affected petitioners as we have suffered a detriment both to our finances, our private and family lives; further that many vulnerable residents have invested their life savings in good faith, and others have accrued up to £17,000 in debt to pay for the work that was carried out; and further that in many cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result we are unable to sell our properties or have the assurance that they are safe to live in, or can be insured.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure that the Government will compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering a detriment because of the Government backed Scheme, and take steps to ensure that this cannot happen in the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate Extension

7.22 pm
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I did not want to throw you, Mr Deputy Speaker, by being in my old place, but it is nice to be back up here on the Back Benches for a temporary period.

I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents opposing proposals to extend the Bredbury Parkway industrial estate in the Tame valley, Greater Manchester. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for being in the Chamber to present the same petition from his constituents. This shows the
value of this green space to both our constituencies. I thank the residents of Denton and Reddish—a total of 1,440 residents in all—who have signed this petition online and in writing.

The petition declares:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that proposals to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate deep into the Tame Valley would involve large-scale developments on the Green Belt land, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people, particularly in the areas of Bredbury, Woodley, Denton and Tameside; further declares that this development would destroy the openness of this section of the Tame Valley and damage the visual amenity from the Haughton Dale and Hulme’s Wood Local Nature Reserves; further declare concerns over HGV traffic in the area and the impact that the proposals would have on an already congested Stockport Road and Ashton Road, and the associated effects on the environment.

The petitioners oppose plans to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Tameside Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government not to support the extension of the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate; and to further urge that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) must follow principles of a ‘Brownfield First’ strategy, so that previously developed land, including derelict or unused sites, must be fully considered before Green Belt is released for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I rise to present a petition in similar terms to that presented by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). It has been a pleasure to work with him—he and I are equally committed to the green belt in Stockport and Tameside respectively and wish to encourage a brownfield-first policy. This petition, to protect green-belt land near the Bredbury industrial estate, is added to the similar petitions signed by thousands of my constituents demanding that the Greater Manchester spatial framework is radically redrawn. It is a pleasure for me to present it on behalf of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that proposals to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate deep into the Tame Valley would involve large-scale developments on the Green Belt land, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people, particularly in the areas of Bredbury, Woodley, Denton and Tameside; further declares that this development would destroy the openness of this section of the Tame Valley and damage the visual amenity from the Haughton Dale and Hulme’s Wood Local Nature Reserves; further declare concerns over HGV traffic in the area and the impact that the proposals would have on an already congested Stockport Road and Ashton Road, and the associated effects on the environment.

The petitioners oppose plans to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Tameside Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government not to support the extension of the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate; and to further urge that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) must follow principles of a ‘Brownfield First’ strategy, so that previously developed land, including derelict or unused sites, must be fully considered before Green Belt is released for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Elder Abuse

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Iain Stewart.]

7.26 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for my first Adjournment debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you were for my maiden speech. Long may this tradition continue.

I want to raise the increasingly important issue of elder abuse, a terrible and perhaps poorly understood crime. At its heart is the trust that an older person may rightly expect to establish with another person for reasons of care, but sadly that trust is frequently violated, leading to physical, financial, psychological and even sexual abuse and to some deeply troubling outcomes for victims.

I want to express my disappointment that, to my mind at least, the issue is too often overlooked at national level. Here in Parliament there have been only a handful of mentions of elder abuse in recent years, even though it is a real and growing problem that can occur in an institutional care setting or a private home. Despite elder abuse being such a widespread concern, it does not dominate our discourse in the way that such a despicable act should. That is disappointing, and perhaps some newspapers are right when they accuse us here in Parliament of marginalising a forgotten generation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I am sure he is aware as I am that families have often had to hide cameras in care homes to film the abuse going on there—we have seen documentaries about that. I agree with him that something should be done about the problem, because elderly people have made a major contribution to this country. Does he agree that there should be better training and better pay for carers, and that the law should be tightened up?

Giles Watling: I agree that there should be financial support, and I also agree about CCTV—I shall come on to those points a little later.

We clearly have a lot to make up for in Parliament, and I hope that today’s debate will prompt some constructive action and, at the very least, go some way towards raising awareness at national level.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the need to raise the issue. I, too, have had constituents who have experienced elder abuse. As people grow older they become more isolated, so the risk of abuse increases. Does he agree that safeguarding adults boards should have a specific focus on older people, and should assess the risk to them and come up with prevention plans?

Giles Watling: I could not agree more. Those boards should have a key role in ensuring that our older people are safe and secure—that is what this is all about.

I am the MP for a constituency where more than 32% of residents are aged over 65—including me, incidentally. That is the highest percentage of any constituency in the country, so it is hardly surprising that I am leading this debate.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend kindly for giving way; he is being very generous. He is portraying this as a British problem, but does he agree that it is not just a British problem? The World Health Organisation has published material that shows that this is happening all around the world. It is a generational problem that we have to deal with, as he rightly points out.

Giles Watling: I absolutely take my hon. Friend’s point that this happens all over the world, but we must clean up our own act first and make sure that we are far ahead of the game, as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Where we lead, others follow.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Each of us in the House tonight has experience of this issue from our constituencies and it is very important. We are absolutely disgusted by the abuse of elderly people in homes across the UK. Is he aware of the recent poll by the charity Action on Elder Abuse, which found that nearly one in 10 older people had experienced serious physical, mental or financial abuse in homes? That would indicate that 23,000 older people have been affected in Northern Ireland and nearly 1 million across the UK. Does he agree that one way of tackling this is to ensure that adequate safeguarding is in place, for example, in care homes, to ensure that older people do not suffer at the hands of those who are there to care for and not abuse them?

Giles Watling: I could not agree more, and I have seen those statistics. We have to remember that this happens not only in care homes, but in private homes where carers come to look after elderly people.

I must admit that since my election last year, elder abuse has not been as prominent in my mind as perhaps it should have been. In fact, it was a meeting with some of our local pensioners who formed the very good group TenPAG—the Tending Pensioners’ Action Group—in August this year that made me fully appreciate the need to tackle this problem. Having gone away from that meeting and investigated the matter further, I was deeply disturbed by what I found. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the statistics are truly shocking. There are 1 million victims of elder abuse every year in the UK, but here is another statistic: only 0.3% of the reported incidents result in a successful criminal conviction. That is not good enough. Convicted abusers often escape with flimsy sentences and trivial fines.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and being generous with his time, which I appreciate is limited. I have also had experience of constituents raising such matters, and particularly financial abuse of the elderly. To declare an interest, I also used to prosecute for Oxfordshire trading standards and came across many people who had been abused in that sense.

There is one category that my hon. Friend has not mentioned: sometimes in their own homes, people can be befriended by strangers for the precise purpose of exploiting and abusing them. Does he condemn that as much as I do—I am sure he does—and will he commend and encourage the volunteer support groups who do so much to ensure that people are not isolated and that such problems are uncovered?
Giles Watling: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I could not agree more that elder abuse in people’s homes is, in some way, even more chilling, and I will come to that shortly.

This is not just an appalling failure of justice; the lax approach to punishment fails to deter would-be abusers, who see older people as a soft target, as my hon. Friend pointed out. We must do more to protect older people. We would not fail the victims of child, domestic or sexual abuse in this way, so why are we seemingly happy to fail the victims of elder abuse? Why are we happy for there to be a lower conviction rate for the abuse of older people than for racially motivated crimes, homophobic or transphobic crimes, domestic abuse and disability hate crime? It is simply unacceptable, and I propose that we put elder abuse in its own category in line with these other appalling crimes to improve the justice outcome for victims.

As we have said, elder abuse can take place in a care setting or in a private home, and chillingly the abuser is often well known to the person being abused. They may be a partner, a child or relative, a friend or neighbour, a care worker, a health or social worker or another professional. Older people may even be abused by the person who cares for them—that sounds like an oxymoron, but there it is—and this abuse is potentially very easy to carry out. I remember being put in charge of my late mother’s affairs following the death of my father. I was astonished at the sweeping powers that the enduring power of attorney gave me—powers that could so easily be abused. Fortunately, my mother had a devoted son who saw her live out her days in comfort and security, but sadly that is not always the case, and when that trust is abused the penalties should be severe.

Abuse can be perpetrated anywhere and by anyone, and that has led to some truly awful situations. In Sussex recently, £10 million was stolen from vulnerable fraud victims in just one year. Some 89% of the victims were aged over 60 and 63% were living alone. In Cheshire, as we all may recall, care home workers were filmed abusing an elderly, blind dementia victim. Those abusers were spared jail, despite the public outcry. In Cambridgeshire, a pensioner aged 105 was assaulted—the oldest known victim of elder abuse so far. These incidents, all of which have taken place within the last 18 months, should never have occurred, and I feel for those people who have had to live through these harrowing experiences in what are supposed to be the golden years of their lives. These are people who have done so much to make our country what it is today.

I wish it were not so, but in Clacton we are not immune to these crimes either. In 2016, a resident in my constituency was defrauded out of £57,000 by his carer, who was sentenced to just 15 months in prison, and in 2013, 16 people were arrested for financially abusing 39 people. All the victims were from the Clacton area and were aged between 65 and 99. I have no doubt that many colleagues will have similar stories in their own constituencies.

I also have no doubt that colleagues will have heard about abusive situations in care homes. Unfortunately, these incidents are becoming more common. In fact, researchers at University College London found that 99% of carers across 92 care homes had witnessed or taken part in troubling behaviour. That is an appalling statistic. It is absolutely shocking and a good enough reason, I think, to install CCTV cameras in communal areas. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) is pushing for that outcome, and I give him my full support.

We would be naive to think, however, that elder abuse only occurs in the care home. As we have said, it can be just as common when care is taking place in the home, where standards can slip, corners can be cut and monitoring can become a side issue, thanks to pressures that mean keeping the system going becomes more important than safeguarding. Domiciliary care, or care in the home, is our most common and important form of care, and we need urgently to address long-term social care funding issues in this sector before we see quality suffer.

One way to do that is to secure the future of the adult social care precept, which has been temporarily lifted over the past three years to allow councils to raise additional funds. In my view, that is a good thing. I hope, then, to see the adult social care precept become a permanent resource for local councils, not just to give a funding boost, but to provide a clear long-term funding model outside of general council tax. However, although I am pleased that the Government have also announced a £240 million increase in this sector, I would also point out that it is not just about money.

To make that point further, I should mentioned Guide at Broomfield, a nursing home in Braintree. It decided to close earlier this year and attributed that closure to financial difficulty. If one consults the Care Quality Commission report, however, one will see that the home’s basic failings had nothing to do with funding. Residents were being left in soiled clothing, and that is a basic standard failing, not a financial one. We could compare that with Beaumont House in Walton-on-the-Naze, in my constituency, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently. It is like a five-star hotel, with all the comforts of a house, where guests are treated like human beings, not just clients. It is not a bad place. I thought I would go there once the good people of Clacton were done with me.

I have no doubt that funding is important, but no amount of money will make up for poor standards, and if we are really to reallyelder abuse, we need to talk about, and rigorously maintain, standards within the adult social care sector. I was interested to read the suggestion from Age UK about how national guidance should be developed on how conversations about abuse can be started and effectively supported by family members, professionals and the older people themselves. I would certainly back this proposal, and I hope the Minister will meet with Age UK to discuss it. I would also like a statutory definition of a crime against an older person and specific elder-protecting legislation to be introduced, as neither currently exists.

What I really want, however, is to see elder abuse become an aggravated offence, although in calling for that change I recognise the steps that the Government have taken to tackle it. For instance, in 2015 domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour became specific offences under the Serious Crime Act. In the same year, a wilful neglect offence was introduced under the Criminal Justice and Courts Act, so there is now criminal liability when a person has been placed under the care of a medical professional. According to the Government’s impact assessment, the new offence was designed to “ensure that those responsible for the worst failures in care can be held accountable.”
[Giles Watling]

and to

"act as a deterrent, moderating the conduct of individuals who might otherwise be disposed to behave in ways that would constitute an offence."

Those are laudable aims, but that has not happened. Perpetrators are not being held to account with firm punishments, and the new offence has failed to prevent any further abuses in care. The example from Cheshire that I gave earlier, and the research carried out by UCL, both took place after its introduction. What is more, the new wilful neglect offence, by its very nature, fails to prevent the abuse of older people who are living in their own homes outside a traditional care setting. They are the forgotten victims of elder abuse, and we must not forget them as we seek to address this issue. To protect those who are still living in their own homes, as well as older people in care who may be vulnerable, we must introduce a new offence that punishes elder abuse properly, regardless of its location. Making elder abuse an aggravated offence will do that, which means that there will be harsher sentences for perpetrators.

A mandatory sentencing uplift is already in place for hate crimes motivated by prejudice based on someone’s race, sexual orientation, religion, or disability. I ask, quite simply, why not age? An anomaly in the law needs to be addressed, and that is a change that we can deliver now. As part of the Government’s efforts to update the hate crime action plan, the Law Commission is currently undertaking a review of hate crime legislation, and I am sending it a letter today. The Government have committed themselves to acting on the commission’s specific proposals, and during the review it will consider whether to make elder abuse an aggravated offence. I hope that it, and the Government, will agree with me that this change is needed now.

7.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Thank you for calling me, Sir Deputy Speaker! I did not have a chance to say that the other day.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) on securing a debate on a matter that is of immense importance to all of us. He has done a great deal to represent his constituents in relation to policing and community safety issues. I understand that a further 12 officers will be sworn in soon in Tendring district, and I thank him for the important contribution that he is making to the House in this regard.

No older person in the United Kingdom should have to suffer abuse or exploitation at the hands of those who prey on the vulnerable. Criminals should not have the opportunity to target the elderly, but those who do should know that they will not get away with it. Older people should not have to fear being targeted, but those who are should receive the right support. It is a fundamental Government responsibility to keep people safe, and never does that responsibility carry greater weight than when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable in our society. That is why the Government take a multi-pronged approach to tackling this issue, working with local government, the police, and the private and voluntary sectors.

First, we need to ensure that we have the right legislative powers to deter and tackle criminals who target the elderly. Secondly, we need to ensure that all older people are connected to the fabric of society. While society as a whole becomes ever more interconnected, older people across the country still suffer loneliness and social isolation—themes that my hon. Friend drew out so cogently. Thirdly, when older people do suffer abuse, we need to ensure that the justice system treats them appropriately, and that they have ready access to the right support.

Rachael Maskell: The all-party parliamentary group for ageing and older people carried out an inquiry recently with a view to establishing a commission for the rights of older people, so that they can have a voice and an agency in society. Would the Minister support such a proposal?

Victoria Atkins: I am most interested to hear of that work by the all-party group. If plans are drawn up, I will of course look at them with great care, as will other Ministers across Government who have responsibility for helping to look after older people, because although I am answering as Home Office Minister, clearly this issue has huge impact across the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and other Departments.

Under current hate crime legislation, targeting an elderly person because they are vulnerable is already an aggravating factor in sentencing. The sentencing guidelines make it clear that those offences should result in a more severe sentence, but we want to look at whether this goes far enough. Last week, we launched the Government’s refreshed hate crime action plan, and as part of that have asked the Law Commission to carry out an independent and wide-ranging review of hate crime legislation. The review will explore whether current legislation is effective and if new hate crime strands should be introduced, such as crimes against the elderly. While we would not wish to prejudge the outcomes of the review, we will study the findings with great interest and will not hesitate to act if there are ways to improve our response. While these are complex issues that deserve proper consideration, all crimes against the elderly are utterly unacceptable, and we will always treat them as such.

But there is more to tackling abuse against older people than making sure we have appropriate legislation in place. Last week the Prime Minister announced the Government’s new loneliness strategy—with cross-party support, I hasten to add. Some 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month. Loneliness is linked to a range of damaging health impacts such as heart disease, stroke and Alzheimer’s, and lonely people are more likely to visit a GP or A&E.

Loneliness can cause people to feel detached from their neighbours and neighbourhoods, which may increase their vulnerability to becoming victims of crime, and then being even further isolated if they fall victim to crime. As part of the Home Office’s contribution to the loneliness strategy, we are working with Royal Mail, local authorities and other partners to trial a scheme called “safe and connected”. This involves post workers checking on vulnerable older people twice a week, and
reporting any problems to local authorities and voluntary sector organisations. We are investing over £450,000 in this scheme this year, and we are delighted that it has already been rolled out in New Malden, Liverpool and Whitby.

We know, however, that those who are isolated might be more likely to be victims of fraud, and, likewise, being a victim of fraud itself can be an isolating experience. We have therefore also provided support to National Trading Standards for the expansion of its scam marshals scheme. Scam marshals share their own experiences, help others to report and recognise scams, and send any scam mail to the National Trading Standards scam team so it can be used in future investigations and trials.

It is also important to ensure that when older people are victims of abuse and exploitation, the justice system treats them appropriately and they have ready access to the right support services. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton mentioned the ability of older people, perhaps those suffering from dementia, to give evidence in trials. I used to prosecute fraud, and some cases involved fraud committed against the NHS or social care. One of our greatest difficulties was in getting statements from elderly people who perhaps lacked legal capacity because of their conditions; without their evidence it is difficult to prove cases. We have asked Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to lead a joint thematic inspection into older people’s experience of the justice system. We will be looking closely at the findings and what we might do to make improvements.

Understandably, Members raised the issue of care, and one Member asked whether the care of elderly people could be included in the safeguarding adults boards. I am told that their purpose is to help and safeguard adults with care and support needs, which includes older people as well.

Through the skills for care programme, which is a piece of work by the Department of Health and Social Care, we are looking to provide services with help and guidance on recruiting people with the right values and skills, and implementing a care certificate for frontline staff to ensure that older and vulnerable people receive the high quality care that they need. In addition, the Government have introduced a fit and proper person test to hold directors to account for care, and brought in new criminal offences of ill treatment and wilful neglect by care workers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton mentioned domestic abuse, and he will know that the Government are hoping to introduce a landmark piece of draft legislation on that by the end of this year. Through my work on that Bill, I have learned, sadly, that domestic abuse can be committed against older people in the home, sometimes by carers, sometimes by members of their own family and, on occasion, by their own children. It is particularly difficult for parents to admit to people outside the family circle that they are victims of abuse at the hands of their children.

We have funded specific services to provide targeted support to hard-to-reach groups, and this is something that we will be looking at carefully across the House during the passage of the Bill. For example, we have provided funding to a charity called Jacksons Lane in north London to engage older people in community-based activities in order to increase their understanding of wellbeing, harassment and domestic abuse and of the support services available to tackle these issues. When it comes to the most heinous crimes against older people, such as domestic and sexual violence, we are determined to ensure that victims get the right support. We know that elderly people can face particular challenges in disclosing abuse, and we are looking at options to provide them with more support, through the draft domestic abuse Bill and through a package of non-legislative measures.

In whatever form abuse takes place, we are working to ensure that we have the right levers in place to protect older people, and that they have access to the right support when they need it. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the important issue of how we can better protect older people from abuse, and of course we are always open to new ideas and suggestions, and to new circumstances of abuse being brought to our attention. We will continue to look for innovative ways for national and local government, agencies and charities to support the services that help older people to protect themselves from, and recover from, all forms of abuse.

Question put and agreed to.

7.52 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government are clear that the needs of the child are paramount when making decisions about the right care placement. The specific issue the hon. Lady refers to has not been raised with me directly by the Welsh Government.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady clearly raises a very important point and is passionate about the subject. The most appropriate and suitable setting should always be the overriding factor in deciding the best placement for a child, but planning policy and approval from care inspectors should also be considerations, and, naturally, the police should be part of that process. I will happily raise the matter with the Welsh Government.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does the Minister share my view that it is crucial that there are enough foster parents with the right skills in the right areas to care for children and meet their diverse needs? Would a collaborative approach between local authorities be helpful in that respect?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The appropriate setting has to be the overriding factor at all stages, but, of course, not all local authorities can offer appropriate settings for some complex needs that different children will have. Co-operation between authorities is always helpful and it is something that we want to encourage.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru’s North Wales police and crime commissioner has long warned that, post Brexit, criminals will use the common travel area to gain access to the UK. This warning has been reaffirmed today in a National Audit Office report. Will the Secretary of State tell me what provision he is making personally to protect Wales from becoming both the highway and the victim of international organised crime?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the question, but I am not sure where Brexit is linked with this. Clearly, there is freedom of movement across the European Union and the common travel area—those positions will still be in place, particularly in relation to the common travel area. I do not think that this is about where the children originate from, because, clearly, there are Welsh children being sited appropriately in England as well.

We have to have as an overriding factor the most appropriate setting and it is important that the authorities co-operate wherever the regulations come from.

Liz Saville Roberts: It is no secret that the Secretary of State does not speak as Wales’s voice in Westminster on Brexit. He has, in fact, poured scorn on the efforts of others who seek to make representations for Wales in Brussels. He may be aware that, together with other sensible Opposition leaders in this place, I am meeting Michel Barnier tomorrow, and I will do my duty to represent my country. Does he have any Wales-specific priorities that he would like me to raise with the EU Brexit negotiator-in-chief, or would that be against England’s interest?

Mr Speaker: In relation to private sector care homes?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady talks about meeting Michel Barnier tomorrow with other colleagues, but I hope that she will stand shoulder to shoulder with the Prime Minister who is acting in the UK’s interest rather than in any local national interest.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Returning to the subject, what changes does my right hon. Friend propose in terms of inspection of care homes to ensure that children are safe in those care homes?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The social care innovation programme plans to change the laws in England so that local authorities have to promote the physical and mental health of looked-after children, and this would be a major step forward in this area of policy.

Leaving the EU: Aerospace Sector

2. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What representations he has received from the aerospace sector in Wales on the priorities for that sector when negotiating the terms of the UK’s exit from the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mims Davies): The UK, and specifically Wales, is home to a world-class aerospace industry. I have regular meetings with the aerospace sector and met Airbus last month in north Wales as part of my engagement with the CBI. It
is a top priority to continue to create and maintain the right conditions post Brexit for this growing international sector to thrive.

Ian C. Lucas: First, I welcome the Minister to her post. In June, Airbus said that a no-deal Brexit would severely undermine “UK efforts to keep a competitive and innovative aerospace industry.” It concluded that it would be “catastrophic” to have a UK Brexit. Does the Minister agree?

Mims Davies: As I have said, the aerospace sector in north Wales is absolutely vital. Airbus has been making those statements through conversations with those involved with the north Wales growth deal. I know, having met the hon. Gentleman last week, that a thriving sector, and the skills associated with it, are absolutely vital. The F-35 avionics global repair hub shows that this is a sector in which we are world-leading, and the UK Government in Wales will continue to support it.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My hon. Friend is quite right to mention the importance of the proposed north Wales growth deal to the aerospace industry in north Wales. Can she say when the Government are likely to make a substantive announcement about that deal?

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for his long-standing commitment to the north Wales growth deal, and for pushing for action and progress in this area. There are some very positive movements, and we hope to make real progress. We need a further update from the Welsh Government, and there will be key meetings later this week.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Airbus employs many of my constituents in Newport and Filton. Close collaboration between the Civil Aviation Authority and the European Aviation Safety Agency is vital to this industry. What are the Government doing to safeguard that?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the jobs and opportunities around the avionics sector in Wales. We are aware of the benefits of collaboration, and seek that as part of the overall deal. It is something that Switzerland—a non-EU member—enjoys, and we will continue to look for it as part of our overall deal.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): Airbus employs a number of constituents in Edisbury. Can the Minister confirm the Government’s commitment to striking a deal that provides for frictionless trade in this sector?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting how important this sector is in her constituency. As an assiduous constituency Member, she raises the challenges ahead, but a good deal that works to support jobs in the supply chain is absolutely the primary focus of discussions, and a pragmatic, frictionless deal is what the Government are working for.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate Louise Magee, general secretary of Welsh Labour, and her partner Luke Holland, who have had a beautiful baby girl, Catherine Ivy, who is to be known as Kitty? Mother and baby are doing fine, and Luke is coping well, I understand.

I welcome the Minister to her place. The Welsh Government have pledged £3 million to support Airbus in preparing for Brexit. ADS, the national trade association that represents aerospace companies, has urged the Chancellor to ensure that there is enough financial liquidity for companies such as Airbus, which rely on just-in-time European supply chains. What are the Minister’s priorities for the Welsh aerospace sector?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I have said in my previous answers, Wales has a deep-rooted, world-leading aerospace sector, and the Government understand that. There has been cross-Government engagement with all key stakeholders to support it. Frictionless trade and supporting the sector are absolutely vital, and we are ready to work and step up to that challenge.

Christina Rees: That may well be, but the Government’s Brexit advice paper suggests that companies such as Airbus may move their headquarters to an EU member state in the event of no deal, which would be absolutely catastrophic for our Welsh economy. Does the Minister agree with her Prime Minister that no deal is better than a bad deal, as far as Wales is concerned?

Mims Davies: The UK Government in Wales are not complacent about the challenges of all scenarios. They are working extremely hard to make sure that all the opportunities are there in any deal, and are working to make sure that the sector thrives. That is vital to the Secretary of State, and to the UK Government. We will continue to stand by the Prime Minister in getting that frictionless deal.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

3. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What representations he has received from the Welsh Government on the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

12. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What representations he has received from the Welsh Government on the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

13. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What representations he has received from the Welsh Government on the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The UK’s exit from the European Union provides us with an opportunity to reconsider how funding for growth across the UK is designed and delivered. In our manifesto, we committed to engaging with the Welsh Government on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and that work is under way.

Alan Brown: At the moment, the so-called opportunity of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund falls within the remit of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, a Department wholly devoted to
England. It therefore does not understand the needs of the devolved nations and is bound to put the needs of England before those of the devolved nations. Does the Secretary of State agree that the devolved nations should have control?

Alun Cairns: The answer is in the title—it is the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and, therefore, joint work is taking place across Government. As the hon. Gentleman would expect, I have shown a strong interest in it, as have my right hon. Friends. Friends the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Clearly, we are keen to work together.

Martyn Day: The retention of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund at Westminster undermines the devolution of economic development. Does the Secretary of State not see that his Government’s refusal to give the fund to devolved Governments is yet another power grab?

Alun Cairns: I certainly do not accept the basis of the hon. Gentleman’s question in relation to a power grab, because the Welsh Government supported the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which demonstrates that his assertion does not stack up. On EU aid and how it was in the system: we can design a much better system with the devolved Administrations, as well as with the devolved nations, and we are ready for immediate discussions before the consultation.

Tommy Sheppard: This is a shambles. Over a year ago, the Secretary of State boasted of an efficient and responsive UK Shared Prosperity Fund, but today he admits that the Government have not even started the consultation on it. With months to go before the Brexit catastrophe, what guarantees do we have that there will be any fund fit for purpose for Wales or the other nations of the United Kingdom?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is highly selective in his references. He fails to recognise that my right hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) to her position and wish her well. The retention of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund at Westminster undermines the devolution of economic development. Does the Secretary of State not see that his Government’s refusal to give the fund to devolved Governments is yet another power grab?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is highly selective in his references. He fails to recognise that my right hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) to her position and wish her well.

Mr Speaker: It is always a pleasure to hear the dulcet tones of the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, but I said “Owen” rather than “Nick”.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Long may it continue. In the first spending period after Brexit, will Wales receive more money or less than it would have received under EU structural funds?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to pre-empt the Chancellor’s comprehensive spending review and Budgets that will come within that period. It is wholly inappropriate for me to respond on that basis, and much will depend on the detail of the nature of the deal we get with the European Union.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Businesses and community organisations across Wales are alarmed at how little detail has been provided about the Shared Prosperity Fund. They are doubly concerned that the consultation that has been promised by the end of this year has not even started. Will the Secretary of State at long last provide a date for this consultation and, if he cannot, may we at the very least have a date on which we can have that date?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we will consult on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund very soon. I am sure that even he will agree that the existing programme has not gained the greatest value for money, as he will also be aware that the then first Minister, Rhodri Morgan, said that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we are now on our third round of EU funding. There must be a better way.
Non-funded Pension Schemes

4. Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What assessment he has made of the implications for public authorities in Wales of the Treasury’s draft valuation directions for non-funded pension schemes. [907187]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mims Davies): The valuations indicate that the amount employers pay towards the schemes will need to increase, and details will be finalised when the valuations are completed early next year. Treasury has committed to support the Welsh Government with additional funding in accordance with the statement of funding policy.

Ben Lake: The 2016 actuarial valuations will have an unprecedented impact on the constrained resources of local authorities, teaching institutions, the fire service and police forces in Wales if UK Government funding is not forthcoming. Will the Minister confirm that this funding will be forthcoming from the Treasury to the Welsh Government?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises this concern on behalf of his constituents, and it is correct that some increases in costs were predicted in the 2016 Budget. We will of course apply the principles set out in the statement of funding policy in determining any additional funding for the devolved Administration, and continue to do what is right for Wales.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): On the Minister’s first outing at the Dispatch Box, will she join me in welcoming the additional funding given to the Welsh Government to fund teachers’ pay rises in Wales?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is about non-funded pension schemes, not funding pay rises. It was a nice try, and the hon. Gentleman is a cheeky chappie, but we will leave that one there and come to the other Smith, Nick Smith.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What is the Minister going to do to protect police numbers, given these financial pressures?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have tackled the fiscal challenge that Wales has suffered with for decades. In fact, Wales now benefits from £120 for every £100 spent in England. As I said earlier, we will do what is right for Wales, as we have done in the case of teachers raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes).

Exports/Foreign Direct Investment

5. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on increasing (a) exports from and (b) foreign direct investment into Wales. [907188]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Since 2010, Welsh exports have increased by 41%, growing faster than the UK average of 36%. There are a whole host of exporting success stories and it was a privilege to support SureChill and Hydro on the Prime Minister’s recent trade mission to Africa.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The Welsh automotive sector is a real success story, but it depends on frictionless trade. What action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that that continues after Brexit?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that that is a plan for and determination of our negotiations. That is exactly what we will seek to agree with the European Union. It is in the UK’s interest, it is in the European Union’s interests and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is working to that end.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that one of our biggest exports is tourism, and the sector deal still awaits to be made. Will he undertake to speak to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to see whether the sector deal for the UK, and Wales in particular, can be enacted?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend, with his great knowledge and interest in Wales, recognises the value of tourism to the Welsh economy, and I meet him regularly. My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for delivering on the industrial strategy, but my hon. Friend right: Lonely Planet named north Wales the fourth top place to visit in the world in its recent report. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: There are a lot of very noisy private conversations taking place, but I want to hear the mellifluous tone of Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The latest HMRC statistics show a 7% increase in Welsh exports to the EU, worth £643 million, while non-EU exports have fallen. Is it not the reality that trade deals with the US, China and the moon will never replace lost trade with the single market and the customs union?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the export data that I highlighted—that exports from Wales have grown faster than from other parts of the United Kingdom—and I could cite a range of export opportunities in other parts of the world on which Wales is doing better than other parts of the UK. I am hugely impressed by the renewed interest in the UK by an international audience as a result of our leaving the
European Union—Aston Martin, Qatar Airways and a host of others that I could cite are clear demonstrations of that.

New Prison: South Wales

6. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the plan to build a new prison in South Wales. [907189]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): This Government are investing in the prison estate—replacing older prisons with high-quality, modern establishments. A new prison in Wales could create up to 500 jobs and contribute £11 million a year to the economy.

Gavin Newlands: Over one third of adults released from prison in Wales go on to reoffend. Considering that the last prison that the Ministry of Justice built in Wales cost £250 million, does the Secretary of State not think that money would be better spent on rehabilitative measures that actually help those who need them—which, alongside a presumption against short sentences, in Scotland has been shown to reduce recidivism rates considerably—rather than on another costly UK Government vanity project?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and clearly we would like the population of the prison estate to decline, but of course we also have to keep the community safe, and it is the right thing to do. We need to modernise the estate, and we would like to build a prison in south Wales.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that high-quality modern accommodation located as near to prisoners’ homes as possible is a vital part of the rehabilitation process? Will he therefore join me in welcoming this Government’s extra commitment to spending on the prison estate?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s interest and the expertise that he shows in working with the police on this basis. A new prison would create 500 new jobs. More importantly, it provides for much better outcomes for offenders, in order to help their rehabilitation and keep our communities safe.

Welfare Changes

7. Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on people in Wales of the UK Government’s recent changes to welfare benefits. [907190]

8. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on people in Wales of the UK Government’s recent changes to welfare benefits. [907194]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mims Davies): Our welfare reforms are incentivising work and supporting working families. The employment rate in Wales is at a record high, and the unemployment rate is at a record low. We will continue to take a test and learn approach, acting on feedback and improving the system as it rolls out.

Ms Rimmer: Why are these Government determined to press ahead with managed migration against the advice of more than 80 disability organisations, the Resolution Foundation and the National Audit Office that they should not do so until the major flaws in the universal credit system are sorted so that it can cope with the higher claimant volumes?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I dispute its premise. This is a personal, focused benefit, which offers us an opportunity to help people with health conditions, provide tailored support from work coaches, assist with housing costs, and give advances. We are listening and responding during the roll-out. This is a huge change in a complicated system, and we are testing and learning, but above all we are helping people.

Gerald Jones: Universal credit is a shambles. In my constituency, a homeless gentleman was told that phone claims for universal credit were not allowed, and that claims must be online only, although he has no access to IT or a computer. Vulnerability was not considered, and, ironically, the man was even offered a home visit. Will the Minister urge DWP colleagues to reconsider the online system and reintroduce phone claims?

Mims Davies: There is an opportunity to make phone claims. I would be happy to hear about that constituency case, although it is very concerning. This benefit is about ensuring that people are better off in work, and are able to respond in particular circumstances. In the Cwmbran jobcentre, positives are being fed back in terms of adjustments and simplification on the ground. If that is not happening in this gentleman’s case, will the hon. Gentleman please let me know?

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a shame that Labour Members fail to recognise the transformative effect of universal credit in lifting people out of poverty and getting them back into work? That is in stark contrast to Labour’s approach, which left people trapped on benefits for decades or more.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the myriad complex reasons for which people may struggle to get back into work. The reason may involve personal circumstances, it may involve long-term legacy benefits, it may involve skills, or, indeed, it may involve confidence. With this project of universal credit, if we continue to scare people off approaching jobcentres and making use of advice—budgeting advice, and the advice of work coaches—then we will not be listening and learning from the people whom the Labour party has left to fester on legacy benefits, and that will not help anyone.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) rose—

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Having consulted his scholarly cranium, the Clerk advises me that, by land, Witney is closer to Wales than Torbay, and upon that basis, I call Mr Robert Courts.
Robert Courts: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I, too, welcome the Minister to her post. Does she agree that the Government’s welfare reforms show that people are better off in work, and that it is the best route out of poverty?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. From Witney to Torbay, people are getting into work more quickly, staying in work longer and progressing in work, which is very important. We are listening and learning. This is a huge change, but we do not need to row back. Claimants are getting into work and staying in work, and, as we know from the Prime Minister, the route out of poverty is having a job.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907243] Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): It has been announced this morning that Sir Jeremy Heywood is sadly standing down as Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service to concentrate on his recovery from ill health. Jeremy has been an exemplary public servant for more than three decades, serving with the highest distinction Prime Ministers and Ministers in all parties in the finest traditions of the civil service. As he steps down, he can look back on a contribution to public life that few in our country can match, and I am personally very grateful to him for the support that he has given me as Prime Minister since my first day in No. 10. I am sure that the whole House will join me in offering our very best wishes to Jeremy and his family.

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

Mr Sweeney: Two teenage brothers from my constituency, Somer and Areeb, have lived in Glasgow since the youngest was five years old. They are now naturalised Glaswegians, but they live in constant fear of deportation to a country from which they fled in fear of their lives. Their school friends at Springburn Academy rallied to their cause by launching a petition, which has now been signed by more than 90,000 people, and which was recently presented to the Home Office by the school and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. However, that action has been met with callous indifference.

When the Leader of the Opposition met the children in August, he was appalled by the lack of compassion shown by the Home Office towards these boys who have been kept in limbo for years. Will the Prime Minister now review the case, and meet the boys to witness at first hand what life is like at the sharp end of this Government’s hostile environment?

The Prime Minister: Every case in relation to people’s right to stay here in the United Kingdom is looked at extremely carefully, and I will certainly ensure that the Home Office looks again at this case.

Q2. [907244] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): If music be the food of love, we could certainly do with a lot of music just now. In that regard, will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Sir Michael Parkinson having opened the expanded premises of the United Kingdom’s first jazz centre in Southend on Saturday, inspired by Digby Fairweather and displaying wonderful jazz memorabilia and music—and is that not yet another reason why Southend should be declared a city?

The Prime Minister: I have of course been known to move to a little bit of music myself on occasions. I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this excellent new centre, and I am extremely pleased that it was opened by my constituent, Sir Michael Parkinson. My hon. Friend might know that culture is one of the key strands of the Government’s GREAT Britain campaign; that is about promoting arts from across the whole of the UK to global audiences. We like to see and support events around the country showcasing the excellent range of performing arts that we have, and I join my hon. Friend in welcoming this new jazz centre—and I note the bid he has put in once again in relation to Southend.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in thanking the former head of the civil service Jeremy Heywood for his public service and wishing him well in his recovery. I know from my conversations with him what an impressive, well informed and dedicated public servant he is, and I hope he gets through this difficult condition he is in at the present time.

The Prime Minister says that austerity is over; the Conservative leader of Walsall Council says austerity is alive and kicking. Who is right?

The Prime Minister: After a decade of austerity people need to know that their hard work has paid off and that, because of their sacrifices, there are better days ahead. We will be setting out our approach in the spending review next year. [Interruption.] What does it mean? I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what it means: it means debt going down as a share of the economy and support for public services going up. Unlike Labour, we will continue to live within our means and we will not go back to square one.

Jeremy Corbyn: This process has not been very convincing to Mike Bird, the Conservative leader of Walsall Council, who says: “Never ever believe what you hear from central government, austerity is not over.” The Prime Minister’s MPs seem to have lost confidence in her, and so have her councillors. Not far away, in Derby, the Conservative council says the financial outlook is “extremely challenging with Government austerity measures confirmed as continuing.” Will the Prime Minister try to cheer up these gloomy Tories in Derby and confirm to them that next week the Budget will cancel the planned £1.3 billion cut for local government next year?

The Prime Minister: Actually, we are making £1.3 billion more available in the next two years to councils, and I am pleased to say—[Interruption.] I am pleased to say that council tax is down in real terms since under the last Labour Government. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to make statements about what should be in the
Budget, perhaps we ought to look at his past predictions. He said our plans would mean 1 million people losing their jobs. What have we seen? We have seen 3.3 million more people in work. He said our plans would mean Greek levels of youth unemployment. What have we seen? Youth unemployment is at a record low. He will find out next week what is in the Budget, but there is one thing that we know for certain: Labour will still make a mess of the economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister did not get round to mentioning the record numbers of people on zero-hours contracts; the record levels of in-work poverty, meaning that people who are in work have to access a food bank; or the fact that wages are lower in real terms than they were eight years ago and that her Government have cut 49% from local government since 2010.

Staffordshire police have lost 500 officers. On Sunday, the chief constable, Gareth Morgan, said sorry to his police colleagues and their families as they had to cancel rest days just to maintain the service. He apologised to his officers. Will the Prime Minister apologise to the police as well?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the police and about what is available for the police. Of course, what we saw at the last election was the Labour party saying that £300 million more should be made available to the police. What we have done is make available £460 million more to the police. If he wants to talk about figures, I have a book here that is edited by the shadow Chancellor. In it, an article by an economic adviser to the Labour party says about its last manifesto that

“the numbers did not add up”—[Interruption.]

I have even got the page marked. It also said that this was “a welcome feature” and “largely irrelevant”. Well, it may be irrelevant to the right hon. Gentleman and the shadow Chancellor, but it is not irrelevant to the people whose taxes go up, whose jobs are lost and whose children have to pay Labour’s debt.

Jeremy Corbyn: Only one party costed its manifesto in the last election, and it was not the Tory party.

For all that the Prime Minister says about the police, the reality is that there are 21,000 fewer police officers than there were eight years ago. She should listen to the chief constable of the West Midlands, who says that criminals are well aware now how stretched we are.”

Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister told the House that people on universal credit “will be protected”. The very next day, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that, on universal credit,

“some people will be worse off.”

Which statement is true?

The Prime Minister: I remind the right hon. Gentleman of what I made clear to the House: those people who are moved through the managed migration process on to universal credit will indeed have, I think, around £3 billion of transitional protection. Let me just tell him what happens under universal credit—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): No, no, no. Answer the question!

The Prime Minister: The shadow Foreign Secretary says “No, no, no.” Labour Members do not want to know what happens in terms of universal credit: 200,000 more people into work, 700,000 people getting the extra money they are entitled to and 1 million disabled households getting more money per month. We are not replicating the old system, because the old system did not work. This is a system that helps people into work and makes sure work pays.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister is completely out of touch with the reality of what universal credit is about: £50 per week worse off; weeks waiting for the first payment when people move on to universal credit; people going into debt and losing their homes; and people who are stressed out beyond belief because they cannot make ends meet and have to access a food bank just to feed their children. That is the reality of universal credit.

Eight years of Tory austerity means that there are 40,000 nurse vacancies in the NHS. The number of students applying for nurse training has fallen by over 16,000 since the cut in the nurse bursary. The Prime Minister told us that austerity was over. Will the Government take the necessary step next week in the Budget of restoring the nurse bursary so that those who want to become nurses in our NHS can realise their ambitions?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the wait that people experience in order to get their first universal credit payment. We announced in last year’s Budget that we were reducing the period of time that people had to wait for their first payment, and what did the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour party do? They voted against that change.

The right hon. Gentleman said that if austerity is ending, we should be borrowing more for the national health service. May I remind him that this Government have announced that we will be putting £394 million a week more into the national health service? At the last election, Labour said that, with 2.2% more money going in each year, the NHS would be the envy of the world. I can tell the House that we are not putting 2.2% in. We are not putting 2.5% in and we are not putting 3% in. We are putting an extra 3.4% in, with a long-term plan that will deliver for people up and down this country.

Jeremy Corbyn: Applications for nurse training dropped by 12% in September—that is the reality of taking away the nurse bursary. Those who want to become nurses cannot afford to go into debt in order to do a job that they want to do and that we all need them to do.

This Government are simply not being straight with the public. They promised an end to austerity; they cannot even fool their own councillors. They promised the NHS an extra £20 billion, but we do not know where it is coming from or when it is coming. GP numbers are falling, health visitor numbers are falling and nurse numbers are falling. They promised that universal credit would protect everyone, but the Work and Pensions Secretary let the cat out of the bag, saying that

“people will be worse off”.

This content is from the publication "Oral Answers to Questions" and is from the UK Parliament. It provides a historical account of discussions and debates on various topics, including economic policies, employment, and social services. The exchanges reflect the political landscape of the UK during the period in question, with a focus on the Conservative and Labour parties' stances on issues like unemployment, austerity, and the impact of economic measures on the public. The text highlights specific examples, such as changes in police numbers, the effects of universal credit, and the state of the NHS under different administrations. The interactions between political figures, such as the Prime Minister and Jeremy Corbyn, showcase the dynamic nature of parliamentary questioning and the public discourse on economic and social policies.
The Prime Minister claimed that she is ending austerity, so will she confirm that next week’s Budget will mean more police on our streets and more nurses in our hospitals, and that elderly people in desperate need of care will not go ignored and forgotten by her Government?

The Prime Minister: What have we seen under this Government? We have seen more money being made available to the police, more money for the health service, more money for social care, more money going into local authorities, and more money going into our schools. At the end of this Parliament, we will be spending £500 million more in real terms on people of working age and children in our welfare system.

Let us look at what we now know about the Labour party’s alternative. We now see, as reported by a respected academic, that Labour’s plans, by its own admission, would cost £1,000 billion. That is the equivalent of £35,000 for every household in this country. We know what that would mean: higher debt; higher taxes; fewer jobs—Labour just taking us back to square one.

Q3. [907245] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Belmont and Betteridge special schools do a fantastic job of educating children with special educational needs in my constituency, but over the past decade they have had to contend with an explosion in pupil complexity—emotional, behavioural and medical. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need a careful examination of what lies behind such seismic changes so that we can deliver the best possible outcomes for all our children for years to come?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. It is absolutely vital that such children have the right combination of education, health and care provision to ensure that they have the support that is right for them and that they are able to reach their full potential, just like other children. Our reforms to both SEN provision and disability assistance are key to that. However, my hon. Friend’s question was about research, and the increasing complexity is an important matter. I am pleased to say that the Department for Education has several research projects under way in fields relating to such children and young people, and we are committed to building up a rich body of evidence on both identification and the outcomes of educational experiences. The Department is also scoping new work that will help to lead to our understanding of such issues so that we can ensure that these children get the support that they need.

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Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although we must do more, all we have achieved so far would be severely damaged if the Opposition leadership had its chance to impose economic bankruptcy on us again, with constituents better off on benefits than in work?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this Government’s record. I congratulate him on the work he has done and pay tribute to his work with the charity HaVinG—Having a Voice in Gloucester—alongside Bishop Rachel. The charity is doing important work in Gloucester.

My hon. Friend is right that, overall, we see employment at a near record high, youth unemployment at a new record low and real wages rising. That is the benefit of a Conservative Government taking a balanced approach to our economy. The one thing we do know is that the Labour party would undo all that good and leave our economy in a mess once again.

Q4. [907246] Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): May I give the Prime Minister some brief relief from Brexit and ask her about dogs? Last week, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, with its specific breeds definition, was not fit for purpose, as hundreds of pit bull-type dogs are confiscated yearly and destroyed, with no impact on dog bite numbers. Will she ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to act urgently on the Committee’s recommendations and not take the approach of the Lords Minister, who told the Committee that even a good-tempered dog had to be put down as “collateral damage”? My wonderful bull terrier-type dog was rescued from the streets, and to think of her being destroyed because her face did not fit in court is chilling.

Mr Speaker: We have heard quite a bit about the dog situation, but I think we are going to hear more.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I had not looked at the detail of the Select Committee report on that particular issue, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is a keen dog owner, as indeed is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is sitting next to me, and that the Secretary of State will be looking at this issue very carefully.

Q10. [907253] Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): We might not make much whisky in East Renfrewshire, but we do enjoy drinking it, and Scotch whisky is the jewel in the crown of our food and drink sector. Last year’s duty freeze has raised more money for the Exchequer, just as Scottish Conservatives argued it would, and the industry continues to make more positive investment in our communities. Would not the least we could do on Monday be to extend that freeze for another year?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the lobbying he has carried out, and I am sure that the Chancellor heard what he said. Of course, as ever, everybody will have to wait until the Budget is delivered to find out what is in it. My hon. Friend and my Conservative colleagues from Scotland mounted a robust campaign on Scotch whisky duty last year, and we were pleased to be able to take the stance that we did on the duty, because we recognise the importance of Scotch whisky to the UK. I have to say that 2017 was a record-breaking year, and that in the first half of 2018, Scotch whisky exports increased further to nearly £2 billion. This is an important industry.

Q5. [907247] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How does denying, delaying or disrupting visas for Moldovan and African trade commissioners, Palestinian academics, artists at WOMAD and Celtic Connections, or Malawian priests and pupils enhance the Prime Minister’s vision of a global Britain? Does the Prime Minister understand that the visa crisis and perceived travel ban serve only to prove that the “hostile environment” lives on, and that Brexit is a small, isolationist retreat from the world stage?

The Prime Minister: The reality is far different from the situation the hon. Gentleman has suggested. There is no travel ban. We remain open to business and to people from around the world, and we will continue to be so under the new immigration system—a skills-based immigration system—that we will be introducing when we leave the EU.

Q11. [907254] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Women who have concerns about proposals to change the Gender Recognition Act 2004 that would allow self-definition of gender have had their meeting venues cancelled, have been subject to intimidation and have even been dragged into courts as a result of private prosecutions. Will the Prime Minister agree to a short meeting with a victim of sexual violence who believes that these plans will needlessly put more women in danger?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important subject. It is right that we are making these proposals on gender reform, but of course this is a very sensitive issue and we have to make sure that any changes take into account their potential impact on women. I am very sorry to hear of the experience of the individual whom he mentioned.

In the run-up to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act and during it, officials met more than 90 different groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups, women’s groups, refugees and domestic abuse charities, but this is an important and sensitive issue, and we want voters to be heard. May I suggest to my hon. Friend that I will ask a Minister from the Government Equalities Office, which leads on this issue, to meet him and the individual concerned to hear directly about their experience?

Q6. [907248] Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It seems that our laws allow rich and powerful men to pretty much do whatever they want, as long as they can pay to keep it quiet, so does the Prime Minister support the Court of Appeal’s decision to back non-disclosure agreements that have been used to silence women who have been sexually harassed and others who have been racially abused?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will understand that I cannot comment on a particular case that is currently before the courts. What I will say, and what I have said previously, is that sexual harassment in the workplace is against the law and such abhorrent behaviour
should not be tolerated. An employer that allows the harassment of women to go undealt with is sending a message about how welcome they are and about their value in the workplace. Just as we will not accept any behaviour that causes people to feel intimidated or humiliated in the workplace, there must be consequences for failing to comply with the law. Non-disclosure agreements cannot stop people from whistleblowing, but it is clear that some employers are using them unethically. The Government are going to introduce for consideration and consultation measures to seek to improve the regulation around non-disclosure agreements and to make it absolutely explicit to employees when a non-disclosure agreement does not apply or cannot be enforced.

**Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): Currently, if someone pays a mortgage, their mortgage payments every month help them to build up their credit history, but if someone pays rent every month, that does not happen, which just is not fair. We can fix this situation for 15 million renters. The Creditworthiness Assessment Bill could help to give millions more renters throughout the country affordable credit, including mortgages, so that we can all get on in life. Will the Prime Minister take the opportunity of next week's Budget to look at whether the Government could support this Bill, which has cross-party support and has already passed through the Lords unamended?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. As she will be aware, I cannot say what will be in the Budget next week, but she will have noticed that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was here to hear her point.

**Q9.** [907251] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): My constituency, unlike that of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), does depend on the Scotch whisky industry, which is perhaps why the industry is suffering, given that so many people like myself are currently supporting Macmillan with “Go Sober”. There is also the threat from Brexit, of course. Stubborn Brexiteer isolationism could see us faced with a hard border with the Republic of Ireland and a disconnect with parts of the country that voted overwhelmingly for remain. Is the Prime Minister ready to accept that her party’s narrow-minded nationalism poses an existential threat to the United Kingdom and that Brexiteer belligerence could break up Britain?

**The Prime Minister:** We are working in the national interest and we are working for a good deal with the European Union that will ensure that across all industries that are important to this country, including that of members of the Scotch Whisky Association, we can continue to trade with not only the EU but other countries around the world on good terms that will enhance that industry which, as the hon. Lady says, is important for her constituency. We are working for a good deal for the whole United Kingdom once we are outside the European Union.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): Given that the new generation of diesel engines are much cleaner and are comparable with petrol engines, will the Prime Minister use her good offices to help to adjust vehicle excise duty rates, which are having the perverse effect of encouraging people to hang on to their older, more-polluting diesel cars and causing job losses due to falling sales in the car industry?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. I think that she was making a Budget bid; as she will know, and as I have said in previous answers, the Budget will be announced last week. Nevertheless, this is an important issue because we saw demand for new diesel cars fall by 17% in 2017. That decline is in line with the trend in other major European car markets—demand fell by 13% in Germany, for example. It is because of the health impacts of nitrogen oxides that we see these changing patterns and that it has been important to take action. We want to ensure that manufacturers come forward with cleaner cars as soon as possible.

**Q12.** [907255] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): West Yorkshire police have 900 fewer officers than they had eight years ago. The result is a 45% rise in violent and sexual crimes in my constituency this year. Now the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners has warned that the Government’s pension shortfall will cost £165 million and leave 4,000 fewer officers on our streets. For West Yorkshire alone, that will mean another 400 officers lost. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is a national scandal and that the police should be fighting crime, not fighting for funding?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady particularly referenced sexual abuse crimes and other crimes of that sort. We have seen an increase in the number of crimes being reported, but that is partly because we now have an atmosphere where people are more willing and ready to come forward and report these crimes. She refers to pensions; this issue has been known about for some years.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): There have been reports today that the Government are willing to agree that the European Court of Justice would be the final arbiter in most cases arising from Brexit. As this would be inconsistent with the Prime Minister’s previous commitments, will she authoritatively deny it?

**The Prime Minister:** I see quite a few reports and claims about what is happening in relation to Brexit, but I have not seen those particular reports. If they are as my hon. Friend has suggested, they are wrong. We have been very clear, in the work that we have been doing, about ensuring that the European Court of Justice will not have jurisdiction in the UK in the future.

**Q13.** [907256] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): This week’s hard-hitting Women and Equalities Committee report on sexual harassment in public places, the use of NDAs by perpetrators of sexual harassment, the pernicious two-child policy and women bearing the brunt of budget cuts to services show that equality is stalling under this Government. How is the Prime Minister going to address this?

**The Prime Minister:** The position is not as the hon. Lady has set out in her question. In fact, we see women with greater opportunities today. For example, there are more women in the workplace. Crucially, action is being taken as a result of the work that we have been doing on the gender pay gap and the requirement on companies
to report on gender pay, and the pay gap has been coming down over the years. I absolutely take seriously the issue of sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace. It is very important that anybody in any workplace is treated—and feels that they are being treated—with respect and dignity, and that action is taken to ensure that we eradicate sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that when veterans have already been investigated by both military and civilian authorities, they should never be hounded and pursued unless there is overwhelming new evidence? I thank the Prime Minister for her personal engagement on this issue, but does she agree that what is happening to numerous Northern Ireland veterans is against natural justice, damaging to recruitment and contrary to the military covenant?

The Prime Minister: We owe a vast debt of gratitude to the heroism and bravery of the soldiers and police officers who upheld the rule of law and were ourselves accountable to something that will always set them apart from and above the terrorists who, during the troubles in Northern Ireland, were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of members of the security forces. The current system in Northern Ireland is flawed. It is not working. It is not working for soldiers, for police officers or for victims; and, of course, that group of victims also includes many soldiers and police officers. Although a number of terrorist murders from the troubles are actively under investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other police forces, I am clear that there is a disproportionate focus on former members of the armed forces and the police under the current mechanisms for investigating the past. We are committed to ensuring that all outstanding deaths in Northern Ireland should be investigated in a way that is fair, balanced and proportionate.

Q14. [907257] Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Prime Minister has already said that she does not know what is in next week’s Budget. As she probably does not know whether she is going to be Prime Minister next week, perhaps that is not a surprise. Does she agree that providing tax reliefs for private schools is not a good use of public money? Will she just have a little word about that with the Chancellor, who is sitting next to her?

The Prime Minister: What I said about the Budget was that I was not going to tell the House today; hon. Members will have to wait until Monday.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend will remember visiting the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall, which sits between the constituency of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my constituency of Loughborough. The Prime Minister knows that the “N” relies on the NHS being able to work with and benefit from the rehabilitation of those brave members of the armed forces she has just spoken about. What we really need now is my right hon. Friend to bring together people in national Government with local NHS commissioners to get the final decisions made so that we can ensure that we have this world-class facility to benefit people in need of rehabilitation. I will not be going there myself, but I can see that repairing injured legs is very important.

The Prime Minister: First, I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to the courage and dedication of our armed forces. For the vast majority, their experience of serving is positive. Of course, we do see those members of our armed forces who sadly do suffer injuries that are life-changing. The rehabilitation capacity and capability that has been built up at Headley Court and that is now being put forward in the new Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre is very important. It was incredible to actually meet people who had been through that rehabilitation and see the massive change it had made to their lives.

This could be a huge benefit to the national health service as well. I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting this issue. The question of national health service patients being able to use this centre is an important aspect. Everybody’s aim is to be able to ensure that that can happen. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is currently reviewing the proposal for NHS patients to benefit from this legacy of expertise in the new centre.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Prime Minister not accept that the very sensible objectives of universal credit, to simplify benefits and improve work incentives, were seriously undermined by the 2015 Budget of her friend, the former Chancellor, who slashed the work allowance, and that that, together with administrative rigidity, is now causing enormous hardship for families and single parents? So will she listen to the charities and her own Back Benchers who are urging her to pause the roll-out until these deficiencies are remedied?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman rightly makes the point that the universal credit system introduces a system that is simpler, with a single benefit and a single claim, rather than something like the six claims that people might have been making. It is also a benefit that encourages and works with people to help them into the workplace, and a benefit that ensures that, as they earn more, they keep more. This is a benefit that is good for people, as we see from the extra numbers in work in receipt of universal credit and from the fact that, for people who go on to universal credit, the evidence is that they then go on to earn more in the workplace. Encouraging people into work; making sure that work pays; a simpler system: those are the benefits of universal credit.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a children’s doctor, I have seen how some young people with life-threatening conditions, and their families, can struggle to receive the care and support they need, particularly respite care and out-of-hours community care. I would therefore like to draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the report by the all-party parliamentary group on children who need palliative care, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). May I ask my right hon. Friend to take a personal interest in this report so that we can work together to ensure that our most vulnerable children, and their families, get the support that they need?
The Prime Minister: This is an important issue, and obviously my hon. Friend, with her particular experience, is well aware of it in a sense that many of us will not be. I thank her, first, for the work that she undertakes as the co-chair of the APPG on children who need palliative care. Of course, I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with those parents who find themselves in this situation. We have made a commitment to everyone at the end of life, including children, setting out the actions we are taking to make high quality and personalisation a reality for all and to end the variation in end-of-life care. This covers a whole range of aspects, including practical and emotional support, because that is an important aspect of good end-of-life care. That is set out, of course, in our end-of-life commitment and our ambitions for the palliative care framework. But it can be difficult for some commissioners to develop suitable care models for children. That is why, I understand, NHS England is convening an expert group to develop commissioning models that are suitable for this particularly vulnerable group of patients and ensure they get the support and care they need.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The whole House should welcome the commitment to another £20 billion for the NHS. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that the NHS produces a plan to use that money wisely and to strengthen frontline care, including expanding GP services for my constituents in Chipping Barnet?

The Prime Minister: We treat the issue of children’s needs and disabilities in Peterborough?

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Given the £1.2 million-worth of cuts per year since 2014 to children’s services in my constituency, does the Prime Minister believe we have adequate resources for special educational needs and disabilities in Peterborough?

The Prime Minister: We treat the issue of children’s services very carefully, because all children, no matter where they live, should have access to high-quality care. Spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by over £1 billion since 2010, but of course, this is not simply about money; it is about how councils deliver good and excellent services. We need to ensure that everybody is delivering according to best practice. That is why we are improving social work training and spreading innovation and best practice, and where councils are not delivering the standard of service we expect, we will intervene to make sure they improve.
**Point of Order**

12.48 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am extremely grateful to you for accepting this point of order.

It is entirely correct that Members of both Houses engage in robust political debate around the parliamentary estate, but today we have learned that the violent, racist thug and fraudster known as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, or Tommy Robinson, was invited on to the estate and wined and dined in the House of Lords yesterday. I understand that sometimes we have to engage with views that we might not agree with, but surely a man who is as guilty as he is of stirring up racial hatred, organising violent, thuggish crimes around the country, setting up the English Defence League and everything that comes with it crosses a line, and such a person should not be invited to walk among us on the parliamentary estate. Can you advise me and other Members whether that is in order, and will you take it up with your counterpart in the House of Lords?

**Mr Speaker:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which—I make no complaint about this—I have had no advance notice, so I am reacting on my feet and I am perfectly content to do so. What I have to say to the hon. Gentleman is twofold. First, I share his assessment of the individual concerned: a loathsome, obnoxious, repellent individual. I make no bones about my view being the same as his on that front.

Secondly, and this is the procedurally significant point, the question of who might be invited to dine in the other place is outside my remit. I always appreciate the enthusiasm of the hon. Gentleman for extending my reach and scope. I am very grateful to him for thinking in those terms. However, this is a matter for the other place, so when the hon. Gentleman asks me for my advice, my advice to him is that, if he wishes to pursue the matter, he should in the first instance—as a matter of both courtesy and practicality—write to the Lord Speaker to register his views, perhaps enclosing the relevant extract from today’s _Official Report_. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

**Housing Reform**

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

12.51 pm

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to housing; to make provision about housing space and thermal performance standards; to place a duty on the Secretary of State to require the provision of serviced plots of land; and for connected purposes.

I am pleased to introduce the Housing Reform Bill, which will improve space standards, increase the minimum thermal performance of new homes and require the Secretary of State to provide serviced plots of land at scale to offer real choice to anyone who wishes to get their own place to live, whether through a housing association, a housing co-operative, a council house—to that end, the Minister may have noticed the article by Lord Porter in _The Guardian_ the other day—or for private purchase. I declare my interest as an ambassador for the Right to Build Task Force, which is supported by the Nationwide Foundation, the charitable arm of the Nationwide building society.

The Prime Minister has said that housing is the Government’s top priority domestically. True, there have been four Housing Ministers in the past year or so, which does not make it sound like the Government’s top domestic priority, but after all there have been eight Housing Ministers in the past eight years and 17 Housing Ministers in the past 17 years. No recent Government have really taken housing seriously enough, although there are encouraging signs with the new Minister for Housing, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). I will come on to him later; I am delighted to see him in his place.

The planning system should be about making great places to live that are well designed and well built; well connected; well served with schools, health, community and sports facilities; environmentally sensitive, where green is normal; part of a thriving economy with local jobs; and active, inclusive and safe—that is to say, fair for everyone. In other words, we should separate the business of place making from the business of home building, which, so long as it is done to the required standards, can be built by anyone, including—increasingly, and often to higher standards—in an off-site factory.

Instead of that, we have a system that is broken. According to the National Audit Office, 74% of the Government’s housing budget goes on housing benefit, which is 3% of all public expenditure. Some 86% of people would like to own their own home but, despite this, home ownership is falling. There has been a surge in the number of people privately renting, particularly families with young children, not because they want to, but because they have no choice.

Dr Julie Rugg of the University of York’s Centre for Housing Policy, who has done excellent research in this area, points out that in most cases the private rented sector is now a proxy either for people who wish to buy but cannot afford to do so, or for people who need to be in social housing. We have scarcely considered the long-term consequences for pension provision and affordability of people not owning their own homes, if more people are...
[Mr Richard Bacon]

paying rent until they die. Meanwhile, we have two
countries developing: one nation of those people who are
invited to landlord evenings by estate agents and who in
some cases already own several buy-to-let properties;
and another entirely separate nation of those who cannot
afford somewhere to live at all, either to rent or to buy.
Home ownership among young adults has collapsed,
falling to just 27% in 2016 from 65% 20 years ago.

We have a system that maximises opposition. I have
yet to meet the grandmother whose daughter has just
had a second baby who does not want her daughter's
family to have a good home. However, the reason there
is so much opposition to new housing is that most
people feel they have no real say over what gets built;
where it gets built; how it performs—its thermal
performance; what it looks like; crucially, who has the
first chance to live there; and what the benefits of the
new housing will be for the existing community. If we
change all of that, we change the conversation.

We need a system where there is not a prolonged
argument that prevents houses from being built quickly.
At present, a very small number of very large companies
build houses when, and only when, it is sufficiently
profitable to do so. I do not blame them for that—they
are doing their duty by their shareholders—but there
are no real alternatives at scale for consumers who wish
to buy something else. We have to tackle the root causes
of the lack of supply. Some 67% of people are unlikely
to, or would prefer not to, buy the product of volume
house builders. That figure is based on research by the
trade body for volume house builders, the Home Builders
Federation.

The normal essentials for any vaguely competitive
market to operate properly—first, real variety and choice
for consumers; and, secondly, low barriers to entry for
new suppliers—are wholly absent. My Bill will fix this
by doing three things. First, it will improve minimum
space standards. The large volume house builders are
making houses that are ever more like shoe boxes, and
they need to be stopped. When the 1961 report by Sir
Parker Morris, "Homes for today & tomorrow", was
published, it ushered in a brief period when a decent
amount of space was considered normal. The 1970s are
blamed for many lapses of taste, but at least one thing
that went well—so well that it is now regarded almost as
a halcyon period in this respect—was that houses started
to get bigger. Now they are getting smaller again.

Volume house builders routinely construct what are
little more than shoe boxes, even commissioning extra-small
furniture for show homes to create an optical illusion,
whereby rooms in a house seem larger than they actually
are, to deceive their customers. We need nationally
enforced minimum standards, rather than the set of
rather ad hoc arrangements we have at present. There is
clear evidence that people in larger spaces are healthier,
which reduces the burden on the NHS.

We also need better lifetime adaptability not as an
add-on by the rare more thoughtful developers, but as
standard, so that houses can easily be made suitable for
young families, older people or individuals with a temporary
or permanent physical impairment. In this context, I
am looking forward to the launch later today by the
all-party group on healthy homes and buildings of its
report, "Laying the Foundations for Healthy Homes
and Buildings". The chairman of the group, the hon.
Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), is one of the
sponsors of my Bill.

Secondly, my Bill will raise the minimum thermal
performance standard that new-build residential property
must achieve. We have known for decades how to build
a house that costs nothing to heat, but the main house
builders just do not do it. The main capital cost may be
slightly higher in the short term, although even that is
not necessarily true, but the long-term higher costs of
poor-quality housing and higher heating bills are borne
the most by those who can least afford to do so, and
there is also the excessive and wholly unnecessary extra
burden on our planet.

It is possible to produce homes that cost a few pounds
per month for heat and hot water. I recently saw one at
Graven Hill in Oxfordshire, and I know that the Minister,
although he has not been in office for very long, has
already visited Graven Hill, which is the site of the
biggest self-build and custom house building development
in the UK, where eventually 1,900 serviced plots will
have been built on. I saw a house where, with mechanical
ventilation and heat recovery, someone can have heat
and hot water for £125 a year.

Thirdly, my Bill will require the Secretary of State to
provide or to ensure the provision of serviced plots of
land at scale—that is to say, plots of land where the
difficult parts, such as the connections for water, gas,
electricity and broadband, are already done. On the
continent it is quite normal to go to one's local authority
and buy a serviced plot of land. One can be produced
for £12,000 to £15,000, plus the land cost. The Right to
Build Task Force is working with willing local authorities
across the country to make it more normal here, but we
could go much further.

Recently, the city of The Hague in the Netherlands
has provided serviced plots that can be purchased
for €40,000, and a house can then be built for about
€120,000 or £105,000. If somebody cannot afford to
buy the plot, they can rent it and buy it later. Another
innovative scheme in the Netherlands, known as “Ik
bouw betaalbaar”—“I build affordable”—takes people
on limited incomes who are on the housing register and
helps them to bring forward their own affordable scheme
to their own design. Lord Porter referred to that in the
article in The Guardian the other day. I propose a system
where such plots could be obtained by anyone from a
housing association or a local council to a private
individual or a housing co-operative. Simple rules would
prevent volume house builders or other developers from
buying large numbers of plots and would also prevent
flipping.

We have sites with serviced plots, but not enough of
them. It should become a normal choice. In the past
20 years, the ratio of average house prices to average
incomes has doubled from three-and-a-half times average
income to 7.7 times average income. In the 1980s and
until the late '90s, the average 30-year-old could afford a
deposit for a home if he or she saved for three or four
years; now, they would have to save for nearly 20 years.
The system is broken. We need a radical change of
approach, and to succeed we must engage the energy of
our people.

I know that there are people who say that this cannot
be done, or, if it can be done, that it can be done only on
a small scale in certain limited sites. It is certainly true
that it works for small sites, but those people who do not believe that it can be done on a large scale are wrong, and the reason why I know they are wrong is that I have seen it being done; it is just not being done here in the United Kingdom. We will not succeed without muscular help from Government and without engaging the energy of our own people. To those people who think that the energy of our own people is insufficient, I simply join Rod Hackney, the architect, in saying that it is a dangerous thing to underestimate human potential and the energy that can be generated when people are given the opportunity to help themselves. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Mr Richard Bacon, George Freeman, Jeremy Lefroy, Hilary Benn, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Simon Clarke, Sir Vince Cable, Eddie Hughes, Mr Clive Betts, Jim Shannon, Sir Robert Syms and Sir Graham Brady present the Bill

Mr Richard Bacon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 277).

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill (Business of the House)

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill:

**Timetable**

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

**Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put**

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill),

(b) the Bill is amended to remove any provisions which are not agreed to by the House and the Legislative Grand Committee, and

(c) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.
proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of
Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further
suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83F
(Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration
of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any
proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of
this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12)(a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be
considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any
proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall
(so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion
one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings
suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83G
(Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration
of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any
proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of
this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H
(Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any
committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings
have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply
so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not
apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the
Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are
taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the
provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any
Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that
purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and
any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall
thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply
to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to
proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of
the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing
Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today’s sitting after this
Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be
interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of
the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today’s sitting
after this Order has been agreed.—(Karen Bradley.)

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that an
amendment has been put to me, and I am calling the
hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) to speak
and move her manuscript amendment.

1.3 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to
move a manuscript amendment, in line 43, paragraph
(6), after sub-paragraph (b) at end insert—

“(ba) the question on any amendment, new clause or new
schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision.”

There is much talk right now in this Chamber, and
indeed in our country, about what a meaningful vote is.
I wager that a meaningful vote is one that people can
vote on—a very simple line. My hon. Friend the Member
for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and I have tabled
this amendment to today’s programme motion because
we are concerned about the programme motion. Let us
be clear: we understand that this is considered emergency
legislation. We have no desire to delay this important
legislation as it passes through the House, but because it is
emergency legislation it is all the more important
that, where there are concerns about what it may concern,
or may include, or may not include, the House is able to
take a view and Members are able to decide. Therefore,
to see the programme motion today and discover that a
crucial element of it—one that is in most other Bills—is
missing is a concern to us. It is the part that allows the
Chair of proceedings the right to select any amendment,
new clause, or new schedule for a vote. To remove that
section of a programme motion and not to inform the
Opposition of that is a concern to us because it recognises
that there may be issues on which Members have a
strong view, but, by dint of the programme motion, not
by the consent of the House ahead of the time, they
would not get a say on them.

I am sure that the error is in overlooking the matter
rather than a deliberate intent by the Whips to deny a
debate. Therefore, my hon. Friend and I wish to be
extremely helpful, which is why we have tabled a manuscript
amendment to restore that section of the programme
motion, which allows the Speaker and the Chair, at
their discretion, to select any amendment, new clause,
or new schedule for a meaningful vote on this legislation.

I say to everyone in this House that, whatever they
think of the amendments tabled for today, to cross this
Rubicon and decide that there are some matters on
which the House should not be paramount is a dangerous
move to make. I also say to the people of Northern
Ireland, who have already seen so much democratic
dysfunction, deserve better from this House.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con) rose—
Stella Creasy: I will happily quickly give way to the hon. Lady, but I know that the House wants to get on and have its say about this process.

Heidi Allen: I will be very swift indeed. I just want to say to the hon. Lady that there are many colleagues on the Conservative Benches who are absolutely with her on this, and that this item should be voted on.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Lady, because I know that she, like me, believes that the democratic process must be open and transparent, no matter how difficult the conversation and the issues at hand may be.

I hope that all the House will agree that it is right to stick to the kinds of programme motions that we have all come to know and love. With that, I move this manuscript amendment.

1.6 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The point is that we should do things properly. It is an established principle in this House, and in this Parliament, that we normally have three Readings, a Committee stage, and Report, with gaps in between, so that people can consider matters properly. The only time that we suspend that is for emergency legislation. In all honesty, I do not see why this is emergency legislation. By definition, it is only emergency legislation normally when there is no controversy; there is clearly substantial controversy here, which is why we should have a proper Business of the House motion to allow us to consider amendments that have not been tabled by Ministers.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has just said. His reference to a proper Business of the House motion is the view that he has volunteered, but I say this as much for the benefit of people attending to our proceedings and in the name of their intelligibility as for any other reason that it is precisely because I judged that this matter should be capable of amendment, even at the last minute, that I selected the manuscript amendment, so I know perfectly well how to operate in these matters. I am very glad that we are in agreement on that—[Interruption.] No, no, I appreciate that. The hon. Gentleman does not need to be touchy about it. I was merely claiming credit for selecting the amendment.

1.8 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I take the point that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has made in putting forward her manuscript amendment, but surely that is the case that when we are dealing with this type of procedure—emergency legislation that is fast tracked—this procedure is not normally included. The Speaker does not normally have this discretion in a fast-track motion procedure. As I understand it, it is not a question that the Government are trying to mislead anyone; they are just following what is the normal procedure for this type of legislation. Therefore, it is unfortunate that some are suggesting that, somehow, this is a fast move on the part of Government or anyone else. I note that, on previous occasions when Northern Ireland legislation has been dealt with by this procedure, we heard nothing from the Opposition; we heard nothing from the hon. Lady about the need for some of our amendments, for example, to be pushed to a vote. It is worth putting it on record that this is the normal procedure; it is the way that the House deals with fast-track legislation.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that I would in any sense put myself forward as the arbiter of normality; I am not sure that that is my role. I am simply the person who guarantees or underscores order. Nor is it really for me—I am not suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman says that it is—to offer my understanding of the Government’s interpretation of these matters. If the Secretary of State wishes to explain her reasoning, and give an exegesis, she is welcome to, but she is not under any obligation to do so.

1.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The motion is exactly the same as the programme motion tabled to the Budget Bill earlier this year. It is the standard programme motion used for this kind of emergency legislation. The Government are not at all trying to do anything underhand.

Mr Speaker: This is, of course, a Business of the House motion, rather than a programme motion, but I think I know at what the Secretary of State is getting.

Amendment agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill:

Timetable

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill),
[Mr Speaker]

(b) the Bill is amended to remove any provisions which are not agreed to by the House and the Legislative Grand Committee, and

(c) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
(ba) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the chair or Speaker for separate decision;
(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;
(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill

Second Reading

1.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I inform the House that the noble Lord Caine, who will be well known to many Members of this House, cannot be with us because, sadly, his father passed away this morning. I am sure that we will all join together in sending our condolences to him and his family. We send him, and his mother in particular, our very best wishes.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Jonathan.

Karen Bradley: Yes, Jonathan to you, Mr Speaker, I am sure.

I begin by inviting the House to join me in remembering those who lost their lives in the horrific Shankill Road bombing, the Greysteel massacre and the series of attacks that followed. These atrocities took place 25 years ago, but their effects are still felt by those who lost loved ones and by the dozens of people injured. Those who lost their lives will never be forgotten. People from across the community in Northern Ireland suffered in those dark days, and we must not forget that suffering.

When the people of Northern Ireland voted, by a huge majority, in favour of the Belfast agreement, they voted for a shared future in which no one would have to experience the suffering and loss that took place during the troubles. None of us in this House should forget, or underestimate, what was lost before the Belfast agreement, or what has been achieved since.

The Government remain completely and unequivocally committed to the Belfast agreement, not just because of what it stands for, but for what it has delivered for the people of Northern Ireland. At the heart of that agreement is a devolved power-sharing executive Government, and restoring that Executive remains my top priority. Northern Ireland needs devolved government. It needs all the functioning political institutions of the Belfast agreement and its successors. The only sustainable way forward lies in stable, fully functioning and inclusive devolved government. As Secretary of State, achieving this aim is my absolute priority.

The Bill delivers on a number of commitments that I set out in my last statement to the House on 6 September. It is an important step towards our goal of restoring the devolved power-sharing Executive and Assembly. It seeks to provide for a fixed period in which an Executive can be formed at any time. It provides the space and time for this Government to continue our engagement with the political parties in Northern Ireland, and with the Irish Government where appropriate, so that we can renew the talks process, with the shared aim of restoring devolved government at the earliest possibility. The Bill also provides the Northern Ireland Departments with the certainty and clarity they need to continue to deliver public services during this fixed period.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government’s purpose in bringing forward the Bill is limited to ensuring that administrative functions in Northern Ireland continue efficiently, and that it is not about deciding on key devolved policy issues, which are more properly decided on by the people of Northern Ireland and their elected, accountable representatives?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend sums up very well the intent of the Bill. It will enable civil servants to continue to run public services; it will not make them law makers. They will not have the power to change policy decisions, but they will have the ability to continue to make decisions. That is why the Bill is a matter for urgent debate, and why it is emergency legislation. Without the Bill, there would be a danger of essential public services in Northern Ireland not being delivered. That is why the Government have brought it forward.

The Bill does not give civil servants any new powers; rather, it gives clarity on the exercise of their existing powers in the absence of Ministers. It will be underpinned by supporting guidance that provides a framework for decision making for Northern Ireland Departments when a judgment is being made on whether those existing powers should be used in the absence of Ministers.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): As the Secretary of State is well aware, the date of 26 March 2019 appears in clause 1. I am sure people are intrigued to know why that date—three days before we Brexit—was chosen.

An agreement would have to be reached by the Democratic Unionist party, whose Members are here, properly take their seats in Parliament, and work assiduously on behalf of their constituents, and Sinn Féin MPs, who absent themselves and do not take their seats. Will an agreement between Sinn Féin absentee MPs and the DUP have to be arrived at by 26 March next year?

Karen Bradley: I will—[Interruption.] I am not having a good day, am I? [Interruption.] I thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound); he is such a gentleman, as I am sure we all agree. [Interruption.] Better still, he is ensuring that I do not waste any water.

The date in the Bill was chosen after consultation with all the main parties in Northern Ireland. It is not easy to determine the most appropriate date, but we have chosen the date that we believe gives the best chance for an Executive to be formed, and for meaningful talks to take place.

Lady Hermon: That is very helpful indeed. In fact, it is very succinct, and leaves a lot to the imagination. Will the Secretary of State give just one past example of the DUP or Sinn Féin having met a deadline for political talks?

Karen Bradley: I do not see this as a deadline as such; I see it as a date by which a decision will have to be taken on whether an election is called. The hon. Lady will be aware that the date is around the time when purdah starts for local elections. She will know very well that there are local elections in Northern Ireland next May. The date was chosen with that in mind, because clearly once a local election campaign starts, political parties focus on campaigning. She will know that we have had stable devolved government in Northern Ireland, but for most of the last 10 years, we have had a hiatus;
that is far too long, and that is not right for the people of Northern Ireland. It is not what they deserve. I am trying to put in place, through the Bill, the best conditions to allow those talks to recommence, and to enable us to get an Executive in place. The date was chosen after consultation with all the main parties and the civil service of Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State has made several references in her speech so far to the political hiatus. Does she agree that the reason we do not have a functioning Executive and Assembly is that out of the five political parties in Northern Ireland eligible to be in the Executive, four—the Democratic Unionist party, the Ulster Unionist party, the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Alliance party—have all said that if the Secretary of State convenes a meeting of the Assembly for the purpose of appointing Ministers, they will be there and will appoint their Ministers immediately and without precondition, but one party, Sinn Fein, has declined to give such an undertaking? Should we not be honest with the House, and instead of blaming all of the political parties, put the focus where it belongs, on the people who do not take their seats here, who do not take their seats at Stormont and who are outside, looking in? They are the people denying Northern Ireland its proper democratic Government.

Karen Bradley: I do not want to provide a running commentary on the talks I have had with parties since the talks broke down in February between the two main parties. What I would say is that I have heard a willingness from parties that they want to get back into Government. That is why I believe that the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland is that we give those parties the chance to get back into devolved Government and provide the best conditions to enable that to happen—and the Bill is part of achieving that. It is important that we use this time and the powers in the Bill to ensure that public services continue to be run and there is no distraction from the parties coming back together and forming a Government.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept that if an Assembly is to come back to Northern Ireland—and we all here support that—the structure of that Assembly has to be right, so that no one party can pull it down?

Karen Bradley: I want to see a fully functioning, devolved Government as we have seen in the past, as that would be best for the people of Northern Ireland, and so that many of the decisions and the policies that right hon. and hon. Members will raise today can be taken in the right place, which is Stormont.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Is cearta daonna iad cearta teanga agus tá cothrom na feinne tuille ag lucht labhartha na Gaeilge.

Under the St Andrews agreement of 2006, the British Government pledged to introduce an Irish language Act based on the experiences of Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Will the Secretary of State uphold that commitment by introducing an Irish language Act if power-sharing institutions are not restored within six months?

Mr Speaker: I assume that that intervention contained a translation. That is my working premise—

Liz Saville Roberts: I would be delighted to offer a translation if that would be sufficient.

Mr Speaker: I thought it had been offered, but if it has not been, I hope that the hon. Lady will indulge not just me, but the House.

Liz Saville Roberts: Language rights are human rights and the Irish speakers of Ireland deserve fair play.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is right that the St Andrews agreement includes a political declaration to legislate for an Irish language Act, but it is also clear that once devolved Government restarted in Stormont in 2008, that power became a devolved power for Stormont to legislate on. I support the fact that we have statutory underpinning for many of our indigenous languages. For example, during the 2010-15 Parliament, the Cornish language was granted statutory underpinning, and S4C, which was legislated for by a Conservative Government in the 1980s, has delivered a status for the Welsh language that I am sure the hon. Lady appreciates and enjoys on a regular basis. The important point is that it is a devolved power, and I am sure that as the leader of Plaid Cymru in the House she would not want to see the House undermining the constitutional devolution arrangements that exist across the United Kingdom, or cherry-picking points that right hon. and hon. Members may feel strongly about—and I have great sympathy with much of the strength of feeling—as we have to respect those arrangements.

The Bill will also enable key public appointments to be made in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, including reconstituting the Northern Ireland Policing Board. To make it clear to right hon. and hon. Members, a properly constituted Northern Ireland Policing Board is essential for proper governance and accountability, and public trust in policing in Northern Ireland. That is why it is essential that we pass the Bill urgently.

I shall turn to the specifics of the Bill. First, the Bill extends the period provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 for Northern Ireland Ministers to be appointed before the local elections next year. As the House is aware, because Ministers were not appointed by 29 June 2017, the 1998 Act requires a further election before an Executive can be formed. As I set out in my 6 September statement, an election at this time would not be helpful, nor would it increase the prospects of restoring the Executive. The provisions of clause 1 aim to create a period in which an Executive can be formed and talks can take place, by removing that current legal impediment to an Executive being formed for a defined period. Let me be clear about what that means: as things stand, if the parties were able to find agreement and form an Executive, the House would have to pass primary legislation to enable that to happen. During a recess or periods of intense parliamentary activity, we might be unable to find parliamentary time to allow an Executive to form. I do not think that that barrier or impediment to
forming an Executive is one that right hon. and hon. Members would want to see, and the Bill will therefore enable an Executive to be formed without the need for primary legislation during the period covered by the Bill.

The Bill also contains a provision in clause 2 that this period may be extended once, for up to five months. That will remove the need for further primary legislation in the event that, for example, Northern Ireland parties have made progress towards a deal, but a short extension is judged necessary to finalise an agreement and form an Executive.

I want to be clear to the House—I will not wait until March to begin efforts to bring the parties together to work towards Executive formation. Following the passage of this legislation, I intend to meet party leaders to discuss the basis, process, and timing for a further phase of talks, and will at all times continue to stress the urgent need to restore devolution. I welcome all efforts to improve political dialogue between the parties in Northern Ireland, including those by church leaders, who I met earlier this month—following their meeting with the parties—to discuss how best to encourage meaningful political engagement towards the restoration of an Executive.

Lady Hermon: I admire the stamina and diligence that the Secretary of State has demonstrated in trying to achieve the restoration of the Assembly since January last year. However, I am intrigued to learn whether the Northern Ireland Office has taken time to assess the unpopularity of the Assembly in Northern Ireland caused mainly, although not exclusively, because the 90 MLAs continue to receive their full salary while not doing a full job. When the Secretary of State announced in September that she would cut MLA salaries, she delayed the cut until November. Can she explain that three-month delay to the people of Northern Ireland who are outraged by MLAs continuing to receive a full salary?

Karen Bradley: I know that the hon. Lady feels strongly about that matter and she has raised it in the House on several occasions. It is not a three-month delay: I made the statement on 6 September. She will understand that issues need to be dealt with, including notifying MLAs of my decision to cut their pay and changing the payroll arrangements. As I said in September, the November pay cheques were the earliest opportunity to cut the pay, so the pay cheques that will be delivered next week will include the pay cut. The next pay cut will be in January, if we have been unable to get the Assembly and Executive reconstituted by then.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Although I fully understand and appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), I appeal to her to understand that at the end of the day these are people with families. Yes, I understand the public ire at the lack of an Assembly, but most of the Assembly Members are not functioning there properly through no fault of their own. As I explained to the House, it is the actions of one political party in Northern Ireland and its army council—its illegal army council—that are holding the people of Northern Ireland to ransom. It would be nice just for once to hear the hon. Lady call them out for that, instead of labelling in such a way all 90 Members of the Assembly, many of whom are innocent of the charge that they do not want to make progress in Northern Ireland or do their job fully. We treat them unfairly when we label them all in the same way without calling out the people who refuse to do their jobs and sit outside; the majority of Assembly Members want to work full time and do the full job. Of course, the House has taken the decision to cut their pay and we support that, but there are practical issues. They and their families need proper notification. When she makes these points, the hon. Lady should not just put the blame on everyone.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, let me say this in good humour, if I may. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) are themselves so unfailingly courteous to colleagues and, indeed, to everybody, that it is really very difficult to get annoyed with them—and I am not. I hope, however, that they will take it in the right spirit if I say that in respect of both of their “interventions”, the erudition was equalled only by the length.

Karen Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I could not have put it better myself.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) makes an important point, in that it is not the fault of Members of the Legislative Assembly that this is the situation. The MLAs I meet regularly want to get back to the Executive and the Assembly, and it is important we recognise that. I also want to put on record once again that I am of course not cutting the pay of any of the staff of MLAs. As we all know in this House, our staff work tirelessly for our constituents, as do the staff of MLAs. They are dealing with casework and constituency matters, and it is quite right that those staff should not be prejudiced against as a result of decisions taken by others.

During the period covered by the Bill, it will be necessary to provide Northern Ireland Departments with certainty about their decision-making powers. Clarity is needed on the decisions that they should or should not make. This follows a recent court ruling against a Northern Ireland Department’s decision to approve a major waste disposal and energy generation facility. The Bill clarifies that a senior officer of a Northern Ireland Department is not prevented from exercising departmental functions in the absence of Ministers during the period for forming an Executive, if the officer is satisfied that it is in the public interest to do so. The Bill also requires that I, as Secretary of State, should publish guidance about the exercise of departmental functions, as I will, of course. That includes principles that senior officers in Northern Ireland Departments may take into account when deciding whether or not to exercise a function, and they are required to have regard to that guidance.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her engagement on this issue. It will come as no surprise to her if I mention the transport hub, which is in my constituency but of regional significance for Northern Ireland. Will she confirm that the decision hoped for before Christmas is the type of decision that can be made under the terms of this Bill by a senior civil servant in the relevant Department?
Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady and her colleagues and members of all the main parties across Northern Ireland who assisted in the development of the guidance. Clearly, as Secretary of State I am not able to say what decision a civil servant would make, but we have looked at the kind of decisions and how they might be made. Given that the example she has cited was approved in the programme for government before the Executive collapsed and that Ministers had indicated that they had wanted to see it happen, it is the kind of decision that a civil servant should be able to take on the basis of the guidance as issued.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State is being very generous in giving way. From reading the Bill and listening to the Secretary of State’s answer, it is very unclear to me precisely which sort of decisions will or will not be enabled under this legislation. Can she give us an example of a decision that would not be allowed to be taken by a civil servant?

Karen Bradley: I was just about to say that I have published a draft copy of the guidance and placed it in the Library of the House so that hon. and right hon. Members can have a clear sense of what it seeks to do. The important point is that throughout my period as Secretary of State—I put on record how supportive the hon. Gentleman was when he was my opposite number in the previous Administration—I have been very clear that what we are not doing is changing policy. Policy and legislation cannot be changed by anything in this Bill. It is about allowing civil servants to make decisions that have been part of a policy that has previously been agreed. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the draft guidance in the Library, and says if he has any suggestions for how the guidance could be strengthened or improved to help civil servants.

I want to be clear: civil servants in Northern Ireland Departments have acted in an exemplary fashion. They have behaved without political cover and without an Executive or Ministers in a way that we should all commend. They have enabled public services in Northern Ireland to continue to be run, and the people of Northern Ireland are continuing to receive their public services. Significant reform is needed in many public services, but this is not about policy decisions on reform. It is about enabling those public services to continue, because the best way to change policy and law in Northern Ireland is for Ministers to be in Stormont making those decisions on behalf of the people who elected them.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State say how many legal actions have been initiated in the few days since the contents of clause 3(4), on the retrospective empowerment of civil servants, were made known? I would be grateful for her confirmation or otherwise, but my understanding is that those legal actions that have been initiated will not fall within the scope of the retrospective action that she is seeking to take through clause 3.

Karen Bradley: Perhaps it is best if I write to the Chair of the Select Committee with specific details, although I want to be clear that we have put in a specific reference to decisions taken since the Executive collapsed because we do not want those decisions that have already been taken to be challenged on the basis that once the Bill is in place there is more cover for civil servants. We want to ensure that the decisions that have already been taken are not undone.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I had the privilege of visiting Lagan College, an integrated school in Belfast, and I would like to take this opportunity to convey to the Secretary of State people’s deep frustration that Stormont is not functioning and their deep frustration about how Stormont functions. Same-sex marriage is an example of a policy that Stormont voted in favour of but was then blocked by a petition of concern. As part of bringing the parties back around the table, is the petition of concern something that the Secretary of State will be encouraging them all to look at again?

Karen Bradley: At the moment I need to get this legislation through, then I can bring the parties together. The hon. Lady is right that the petition of concern was discussed during the last talks process. What I cannot say is what will be discussed in the next talks process.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On the question of decisions and what are believed to be non-controversial issues, senior civil servants were not making decisions on the back of the Buick ruling, and I want to ensure that those civil servants will be given the cover, under this legislation, to go ahead and deliver on issues that are not controversial, such as broadband, which needs to be delivered to rural areas.

Karen Bradley: It is precisely because of the uncertainty since the Buick judgment that we are bringing forward this legislation. I do not want to be bringing this Bill forward; I would much rather not be standing here at this Dispatch Box, taking the Bill through the House, because I would much rather that there were Ministers in Stormont making the decisions on behalf of their constituents; but there are not, and faced with the reality of the situation, I have to do what I consider to be best for the people of Northern Ireland, to ensure that their public services can continue, and that civil servants can continue to take the essential decisions in the public interest that they need to take.

It is vital that Members read the guidance alongside the legislative measures, as it clarifies the legal basis for the decisions.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I just want to be clear in my mind about what the Secretary of State is saying. I understand she is saying that there will be no change in policy and decisions will be made by civil servants in the Departments without changing policy. What happens when, in the absence of an Assembly and an Executive, there is a challenge to the policy—perhaps for being in breach of our international obligations? What happens then to the policy? Who is responsible then for dealing with that?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady introduced her ten-minute rule Bill yesterday, and I know she is a campaigner on a particular topic, which I suspect is what she is referring to. This Bill does not make civil servants lawmakers, so they will not be able to change the law—quite rightly. It also does not enable them to take new policy decisions, because it would be wrong to ask civil servants to do so.
Civil servants across the United Kingdom act in an incredibly professional and independent way and they follow the decisions and the policy recommendations of Ministers, and it is right that they do that. The answer to the hon. Lady’s question is that we need Ministers in Stormont, because Ministers in Stormont could quite rightly make those decisions. They could change the law, and they could make policy decisions on behalf of the people who elected them, and that is what the Bill is about—enabling us to have the best conditions and framework for talks to recommence, and for the parties to come back together and do the right thing by the constituents who elected them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As I understand it, the Bill before us allows vital everyday public services to continue. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could possibly give us some examples of the types of everyday public services that the Bill will help to continue. I suspect they include health, education and transport—things that we all use every day—and it would give greater clarity to everyone to hear those examples.

Karen Bradley: I would strongly advise my hon. Friend to read the guidance, but she is right: the purpose of the Bill is to enable public services to continue to be delivered; and to enable decisions around infrastructure projects, where there has been clear ministerial direction in the past, to be taken, so that we can see continued economic growth. We have seen incredible economic growth in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. We have 60,000 more people in employment in Northern Ireland today than in 2010. I want to build on that. I do not want to see Northern Ireland go back. In the absence of an Executive, we are in great danger that Northern Ireland will come to a standstill. We cannot allow that to happen. However, the Bill is about the essential running of public services. It is not about policy decisions or changing the law. It is about enabling civil servants to carry on running those services.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On enacting existing provisions, would the Secretary of State be able to explain something to me? The Londonderry airport, which is owned by a municipal authority, has got money for public service obligation expansions. It is owed £2.5 million from a previous Executive decision, which was not drawn down last year. Is that the sort of provision, which has already been made, that could be considered under this legislation, and the money paid over?

Karen Bradley: It would not be right for me to answer definitively on any decision that a civil servant may make when this legislation receives Royal Assent, on the basis of the guidance, but the hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about the kind of decision that they may make. I have used Londonderry airport. It is a great airport, and it would be great to see more flights coming into it—and out, of course.

Owen Smith: I am a relative newcomer to this place—I have been here only eight years—but I have just been to the Library, the Table Office and the Vote Office, looking for a copy of the guidance that the Secretary of State says she has placed in the Library, and nobody has a copy of it. Would she clarify where it is?

Karen Bradley: I have received a nod from the Box, which means that it is there, but we will check as to why it was not available for the hon. Gentleman, because he should see a copy of the guidance, given that I have said it is vital that Members read it. The hon. Gentleman on the Front Bench who has great dexterity when it comes to mopping up water—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—appears to have a copy, so I hope that copies will be available for others.

The guidance sets out a clear framework to support Northern Ireland Departments in making a judgment on whether those judgments should be made in the absence of Ministers. The Bill stipulates that I must have regard to representations from MLAs before publishing the guidance, which would of course also be the case, should there be any need to revise the guidance. I would welcome representations from MPs as well as MLAs on its content before I publish a final iteration, which I intend to do shortly after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Those in the Northern Ireland civil service have a difficult task of weighing up which decisions they can take in the absence of Ministers, and I again pay tribute to their hard work and dedication. The combination of the Bill and the proposed guidance will provide a framework to inform their decision making. For example, it is advised that opportunities should be taken to work towards the 12 outcomes published in the 2018-19 outcomes delivery plan, based on the draft programme for government developed in conjunction with the political parties of the previous Executive.

The guidance takes as its starting point the fact that there are certain decisions that should not be taken in the absence of Ministers. Senior officers in Departments will then be obliged to consider whether there is a public interest in taking a decision rather than deferring it. The guidance does not, however, direct the Northern Ireland civil service to take decisions on the wide range of pressing decisions raised by various hon. Members in their amendments to the Bill. As I said earlier, the principle that established our interventions over the past year is that we will legislate when doing so is necessary to protect the delivery of public services and uphold public confidence.

Lady Hermon: Before the Secretary of State moves on, could she please give some hope and encouragement to the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland? We know the recommendations of the Hart report, and we understand from David Sterling, the head of the civil service in Northern Ireland, that legislation was drafted by the summertime. If a departmental permanent secretary does not have the power to take forward the Hart proposals, will the Secretary of State please confirm today that legislation will be taken through this House, because the victims are ageing, some of them are dying, and the situation is morally indefensible?

Karen Bradley: This is a matter that I know the hon. Lady feels very deeply about, and it is the subject of one of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chair of the Select Committee. The difficulty with the Hart recommendations, as the hon. Lady knows, is that they were laid after the Executive had collapsed, and that
means we have no ministerial direction on which of the recommendations have cross-party support and which do not. Although, from my discussions with parties, it is clear that everybody wants some action to be taken, it is not clear that there is a consensus in favour of every recommendation. However, I am sure the hon. Lady will be relieved to know that David Sterling has written to me to say that he would like to consult on the recommendations, and I have thanked him for the fact that he is going to do so, because that is something that he can do as a civil servant. Even if he cannot make the final decision on which of the recommendations should be accepted, he can consult on how those recommendations would be implemented, and I welcome that decision.

Emma Little Pengelly: Issues relating specifically to the victims of historical institutional abuse, for whom I think we all feel huge sympathy, have been outstanding for a considerable time. The Assembly collapsed only about a week before the report was due to be published, and that date was known to everyone, but may I suggest that there are other options? For example, we could consider the contributions from the Roman Catholic Church and other institutions that were mentioned in the report. Some work could be done to establish the number of victims who may be able to come forward to claim compensation and redress. It might be possible to consult on a specific scheme, and, rather than just consulting on the recommendations, use the coming weeks and months to make constructive progress in trying to secure justice and redress for the victims.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes some interesting suggestions. This might be a topic on which we could engage a number of MLAs on a cross-party basis to try to identify where there may be consensus and where there may be recommendations, or other elements, that could be acted on.

The Hart report is an excellent document, and I pay tribute to Sir Anthony Hart, who did a tremendous amount of work. It is right that those victims should receive the justice that is appropriate for them, because they have suffered in a way that they should not have suffered, and all of us in the House feel strongly about that. However, I return to a point that I made earlier. The constitutional settlement is clear, and we cannot cherry-pick the matters about which we feel strongly, on whatever grounds, as matters with which we deal in the House. We have to respect that constitutional arrangement because not to do so would undermine a devolution settlement throughout the United Kingdom, and that would not be the right thing to do.

Lady Hermon: May I urge the Secretary of State please to agree to meet Judge Hart? She has rightly praised the integrity of his work, and the professionalism and dedication of his team. Will she also meet the victims of historical institutional abuse? She personally, as Secretary of State, needs to meet them, and to do so in a timely manner. Will she commit herself to meeting those victims, and also to meeting Judge Hart and hearing directly from him his suggestions about how we could implement his report?

Karen Bradley: I have met victims of historical abuse and heard their testimony. As the hon. Lady will know, when I served as a Home Office Minister, the issue of child abuse in England and Wales was within my remit, and I met many of those victims.

I do not need to be convinced of the need to do this, but we need to proceed in a way that is right and appropriate and that respects the devolution settlement. I would like to see MLAs engaging and cross-party discussion on a number of matters. This might be an issue on which it would be appropriate for all parties to come together and begin to work so that we can get a dialogue started, so that parties can start to regain trust, and so that we have the best chance of seeing devolution restored and power sharing at Stormont. That is the key issue.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Northern Ireland civil service should be engaging with a range of policy decisions, some of which were outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). I was surprised to learn from victims only last week that the NICS was engaging with them on a measure that would establish a commissioner for victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse, and a redress board. I find it encouraging that the NICS is doing that, but I find it discouraging that there has been zero political engagement, political discussion or political direction on how best to make progress with these important matters.

Karen Bradley: As I have said, I want to see political engagement and political discussion—I think that that is absolutely vital. We need politicians to re-engage—with civil society, with business and with others—and I am heartened by the initiatives that church leaders have taken to encourage them to do so. I want to see more of that, and I am working with those church leaders and other civic groups to that end. I will reflect on that in the context of the inquiry.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My right hon. Friend is advancing a powerful defence of the reason she is not becoming involved in this particular case, namely the constitutional settlement. Does she not think that bolting on abortion legislation would have the same impact as someone else bolting on the matters that she has just been discussing, and that we really should not be using the Bill as a vehicle for such matters?

Karen Bradley: As I said, a number of amendments dealing with several matters have been tabled, including one specifically about the Hart report of the historic institutional abuse inquiry. The Bill is not the vehicle for such measures. This is a Bill to enable civil servants to make the decisions that are necessary to enable public services to continue to be run. Officials will not make major policy decisions as a result of the Bill, but they will act in the public interest, and I think that that is very important.

Owen Smith rose—

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) rose

Karen Bradley: I will give way to the right hon. Member for East Antrim, but then I must make progress.
Karen Bradley: The Bill will enable civil servants to act within the law as it stands today. It will not give them the ability to become lawmakers and to change the law. That is a very important point.

Owen Smith: How do I respond to that, Mr Speaker? I grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way one last time. My question is also about Hart. This is not grandstanding; it is pursuing an issue about which many of us—including, I know, the Secretary of State herself—feel very strongly. Is she saying that there is no prospect of legislating in this place to deal with the Hart herself—feel very strongly.

Karen Bradley: The Bill will enable civil servants to act within the law as it stands today. It will not give them the ability to become lawmakers and to change the law. That is a very important point.

Owen Smith: How do I respond to that, Mr Speaker? I grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way one last time. My question is also about Hart. This is not grandstanding; it is pursuing an issue about which many of us—including, I know, the Secretary of State herself—feel very strongly. Is she saying that there is no prospect of legislating in this place to deal with the Hart recommendations, and that that will be done only once the Executive have been restored?

Karen Bradley: What I am saying is that the Bill does not enable that to be done. I am focusing on ensuring that the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament so that we can use the conditions that it puts in place to get the politicians back. The priority has to be a laser-like focus on getting politicians to agree to come back to restore power sharing at Stormont. That is what is best for the people of Northern Ireland.

Let me repeat that these measures do not set or change policy direction on devolved issues in Northern Ireland. That is rightly for the Executive and the Assembly, and our overriding priority is to see them up and running again. The NICS needs certainty about decision-making powers, and we should not be seeking to direct it on issues that clearly require ministerial decisions.

The various principles are set out in guidance rather than in the Bill, as Departments need a degree of flexibility and discretion to enable them to reach appropriate and necessary decisions, and to ensure the continued delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. That guidance, above all else, must be operable for Northern Ireland Departments if we are to provide the clarity and assurance that are needed to ensure that public services can continue to be delivered in the absence of Ministers. We have engaged closely with the NICS in developing the guidance, and the factual information provided by the NICS strongly informed the approach that we have taken to it.

The Government also recognise that, in the absence of an Executive, there will be some decisions that we should make, for instance in relation to the setting of departmental budget allocations for approval by Parliament to ensure that public services continue to function. As I have told the House before, we remain committed to making the decisions that are necessary to provide good governance and political stability for Northern Ireland.

Those are decisions, and actions, that cannot be undertaken without our intervention, particularly when legislation is needed, as it is for budgets and regional rates. When it comes to devolved decisions conferred on Northern Ireland Departments, however, the UK Government and Parliament should not be intervening directly. Therefore, while there is clearly a need to intervene to provide clarity, it is more appropriate for us to set out the framework for decisions to be made by Departments when it is in the public interest to do so, and that is what the Bill will do.

Finally, the Bill addresses the urgent need for key appointments to be made in Northern Ireland and in the UK in circumstances when those appointments require the involvement of Northern Ireland Ministers. Clauses 4 to 6 ensure that key posts can be filled while minimising the extent of UK Government intervention in what are, rightly, devolved matters. Clause 4 allows the relevant UK Minister to make specified appointments, exercising the appointments functions already conferred on Northern Ireland Ministers. As I set out in my written statement on 18 July, these posts are the most pressing appointments. They are essential for good governance and public confidence in Northern Ireland, and include appointments to the Northern Ireland Policing Board, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission and the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. These offices are stated on the face of the Bill to address the most urgently needed appointments while minimising the role of UK Ministers in these decisions that should be taken by Northern Ireland Ministers. The Bill takes this narrow approach rather than putting in place a blanket power with a long list of all possible appointments, or transferring these appointments from being ministerial responsibilities to being the responsibility of civil servants. Neither of those alternatives would have been appropriate.

It is important, however, that we provide for a situation in which other vital offices unexpectedly become vacant, or filling other existing vacancies becomes more urgent. For that reason, the Bill includes the provision to add to the list of offices, by means of a statutory instrument, to allow the relevant UK Minister to exercise Northern Ireland Ministers’ appointment functions in relation to additional specified offices.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): All the appointments in the Bill are justice-based, and I completely take on board the point about those being the most pressing, but how does the Secretary of State plan to continue to monitor what other areas are pressing, because there are lots of roles in other areas that need to be filled, but that will not happen under the Bill?

Karen Bradley: We would use the power only if appointments were urgent and necessary. I would consult the main Northern Ireland political parties before bringing forward regulations, as I did before I introduced this Bill. Essentially, we are allowing appointments to be made to bodies when either a failure to appoint would mean that the body becomes inquorate, or the role is required to command public respect and show full accountability.

A large proportion of appointment functions in Northern Ireland are conferred on Northern Ireland Departments. The provisions that I have already outlined dealing with
Departments’ decision-making powers provide clarity that Northern Ireland Departments are able to exercise the appointment functions conferred on them during the period for Executive formation. They would not transfer to them any appointment functions currently conferred on Northern Ireland Ministers.

The lack of an Executive has also had an impact on appointments to UK-wide bodies, as a small number require Northern Ireland Ministers to be consulted on or to agree an appointment by a UK Minister. The most pressing example is the appointment by the Home Secretary of a new chair of the Disclosure and Barring Service. Similarly, there are appointments made jointly by UK and Northern Ireland Ministers. The Bill deals with such appointments by allowing them to be made without Northern Ireland Ministers, but it retains the Northern Ireland input by requiring the UK Minister to consult the relevant Northern Ireland Department. The changes represent a minimal intervention and a careful balance to ensure that the bodies and offices are able to operate as normal, but without UK Government intervention at a policy or operational level.

The powers given to UK Ministers under clauses 4 to 6 expire at the point that Northern Ireland Ministers are appointed and an Executive is formed. Responsibility for the appointment functions affected by the Bill would then, rightly, revert to the Northern Ireland Ministers.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve strong political leadership from a locally elected and accountable devolved Government. Achieving that remains my absolute priority, and that is why the Bill aims to restore the devolved power-sharing Executive and Assembly, and sets out a fixed period in which I will work closely with Northern Ireland parties to encourage them to form an Executive. During this period, the UK Government will continue to deliver on their responsibilities for political stability and good governance. Northern Ireland has made huge progress in recent years, but we can achieve even more with a devolved Government who unlock all the potential that Northern Ireland has to offer. I am focusing on achieving that outcome—it is the outcome that we all want to see—and I commend the Bill to the House.

2.4 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I begin by joining the Secretary of State in offering my condolences to the families of the victims of the Shankill bombing and, of course, to Lord Caine for his own loss?

From now on, there might well be less consensus on Northern Ireland, as it is very difficult to see how the Bill resolves the major issue Northern Ireland now faces. We operate on the basis of consensus, so we in the Opposition will not oppose the Bill’s passage through this House, but the Secretary of State is now straining the consensus that has existed on a bipartisan basis over the years, because the Bill is grossly inadequate for its purposes. We have now had 652 days of inactivity by themselves and her predecessors in government. While I totally accept that she is perfectly able to say to others—particularly the leaders of the two major political parties in the Assembly—that they also share responsibility for that lack of action, real energy must be put into this; otherwise what this Bill will represent is simply an abject admission of failures of the past and a gross lack of ambition and hope for the future, and that cannot be acceptable.

There is a constitutional crisis in Northern Ireland. The public are now entitled to begin to lose faith in the political institutions established under the Good Friday agreement. The public lose faith when they see that those institutions fail to work, and there are many issues, which I will touch on later, where we must have concern about the impact on the lives of Northern Ireland’s citizens. This constitutional crisis is therefore also now developing into a human crisis, and that is the measure against which I say that this Bill is simply inadequate.

In the past, we had the political ambitions of John Major as Prime Minister, working with Albert Reynolds, and Tony Blair as Prime Minister, working with Bertie Ahern, and we had the ambitions of the David Trimble of this world, alongside at that time John Hume, and later on of Dr Ian Paisley with Martin McGuinness, who were prepared to take risks, but so as well were Secretaries of State and Prime Ministers. David Cameron intervened during the Stormont House agreement process, to make sure the prime ministerial writ was there. We have not seen that level of activity from our Prime Minister. I accept that she is, rightly, preoccupied with Brexit, but Northern Ireland matters, and the constitutional situation of Northern Ireland also matters. We must establish that. That is why the Bill is so disappointing.

Let me address why the Bill has come before the House. It obviously has some merit, and we strongly support the need to appoint people to bodies such as the Policing Board. That is common sense and the right thing to do. The Secretary of State is right to say that we need to prioritise some important decisions and that decisions must be made here in Westminster where those decisions cannot be made in Belfast at Stormont. However, the simple fact is that there are many other areas of activity where we must see action, too.

One of the drivers in bringing this proposed legislation forward is the Secretary of State’s concern that she would be judicially reviewed because of the failure to cull an election. Ironically, that refers back to the question asked by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) on the Hart inquiry. Victims of institutional abuse could not judicially review questions about Hart, so they took the judicial review about the timing of elections. It is ironic that the Secretary of State brings this proposed legislation forward but can say nothing helpful about the need for compensation for the victims of sexual and institutional abuse that Hart did so much to unearth. We can take those remedies, and I hope that the Secretary of State will think long and hard about why we cannot also see this as the kind of priority that would serve to achieve a consensus across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Equally, the Buick judgment has caused real uncertainty, but it has placed limitations on the capacity of civil servants. We need to be very certain that we are not doing more and returning to the position where we are asking civil servants to make politically controversial decisions that should only be taken by elected politicians, possibly and best of all, of course, in the Stormont Assembly; but if that does not happen, some of those decisions might have to come to the Secretary of State and this House for us to resolve.
This is particularly true in the light of the extraordinarily long period that the Secretary of State has outlined, with no certainty of any movement until March next year and a further five months if that fails. Frankly, it beggars belief that the Secretary of State should have to tell the House that a further five months could be necessary just in case we are close to an agreement at the end of March. That really challenges all our imaginations. It does not seem a reasonable justification necessary just in case we are close to an agreement at beggars belief that the Secretary of State should have to have gone by since then. Has she now given any thought to how to get those talks restarted? We need to see some urgency in relation to those talks. We need to see the leaders of the five political parties get round the same table. If they do not come forward—if that is the challenge posed by DUP Members—let us test that. Let us see who does not turn up for those multi-party talks.

The Secretary of State has already been asked about having an independent chair, which has worked in the past. It is difficult to find an independent chair who would be acceptable to all the parties, but it is not impossible. It was not impossible in the past, and it should not be now. If taking that step could begin to unlock this logjam, we must look at taking it. I have also said to her on a number of occasions that we need to re-institutionalise the use of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which has fallen into disrepute. It is part of the Good Friday institutions, and it has not disappeared. It has not in any sense been abolished. It met once in London, but I understand that the agenda was so slimmed down that it had little merit other than to reintroduce Ministers from either side of the Irish sea to one another. We have to do better than that. We have to get the next meeting in Dublin tabled, with an agenda that will be helpful in moving us all forward.

We need to see a change of gear and a change in energy, because this matters enormously in regard to the sorts of things that will not be done. People have already asked the Secretary of State about matters that they hold dear in their constituencies, such as the airport in Londonderry, the York Street interchange, the dualling of the A5 and the A6, and the introduction of proper broadband connections across Northern Ireland. Those are important issues, and I agree with her that they could be delivered through the capacity of the Northern Ireland civil service under the Bill. However, there are issues that go beyond that capacity and that the civil service would struggle to address. I want to talk about a number of those issues, because they are massively important. I also want to quote the Secretary of State again. She said that, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Assembly,

"the UK Government will always deliver on their responsibilities for political stability and good governance in the United Kingdom."—[Official Report, 9 July 2018; Vol. 644, c. 757.]

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and we are now entitled to see this Government beginning to deliver on those issues. I want to raise some topical issues. A court judgment in Belfast today involves a woman whom I have met, Sarah Ewart. That judgment allows her to take forward her case that the decision to refuse her an abortion in Northern Ireland was outwith the law. I congratulate Sarah on her bravery in taking her case forward. If she were to win it, where would the remedy lie? The Minister of State is a lawyer, and I hope that he will tell us the answer to that question when he responds to the debate. We know that if Sarah has to fight her case all the way through to the Supreme Court, as has happened in a previous case, the chances are that the Supreme Court will make the identical judgment and say that its judgment is binding because it relates to a named individual. In those circumstances, the Supreme Court will make it absolutely clear that the remedy lies not in Stormont but here in Westminster, because the judgment is about the conformity of the United Kingdom, not just Northern Ireland, with the European convention on human rights. Ministers over here have to think about this, because it is an important human issue.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) has tabled a helpful amendment relating to the Hart inquiry, and I hope that the House will reach a point at which this issue can be resolved. I repeat to the Minister the pleas that we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the hon. Member for North Down and others about ageing victims. I have met some of the victims, and they are no longer young people. Some of those affected have now passed away over the passage of time, so we have to bring the question of institutional abuse to a conclusion. We have to do what we can to implement the Hart judgment, and we cannot wait until August next year or beyond if the Secretary of State's ambitions do not come to fruition.

We must also look at what the Secretary of State can do here at Westminster. Again, she needs to show some urgency in trying to resolve the kinds of things that have held up the agenda in Northern Ireland in the past. For example, why is the historical enquiries unit not being set up? There is also the question of pensions for victims of the troubles. These are the kinds of things that can be, and should be, done here. The consultation has taken place, and we need to see definitive action now. We need to see a road map of how the Secretary of State will put urgency into these different processes.

The Secretary of State has said that the Bill deals with important issues, and that is true, but there are still issues of enormous importance that will not be affected by the legislation. There are things that the civil servants will not be able to resolve, but they will still affect the lives of the people living in different parts of Northern Ireland. One issue that I have raised before in the House is the benefits system. The Stormont Assembly was able to provide some mitigation against the impact of Government cuts to welfare spending. Ironically, those cuts are affecting my own constituency and those of Ministers here in England, but the protections afforded to people in Northern Ireland through Stormont are already beginning to expire, and they will have done so by next March. Nothing in the Bill will allow those
mitigations to continue, even though they were consensually built in by the Stormont Assembly. That kind of decision needs to be made.

On a different level, we have heard today that coaching is now being cut back. That includes the coaching of young people through the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Football Association. This might seem small in the bigger scheme of things, but these small things make a material difference to people’s way of life. We also know that Harland and Wolff is looking for decisions about training programmes. Such programmes would enable the company not to import welders from the Baltic states because it would have the capacity to train people from the Belfast constituencies. That would make a huge difference to individual lifestyles there.

I also want to touch on the crucial question of the Northern Ireland health service, which is now in a very bad state. We know that it no longer has the ability to hit the targets that it has established for itself. For example, the target of seeing most people within nine weeks and none over 15 weeks is now being massively breached. There are people with spinal conditions who have waited more than 155 weeks to be seen in Northern Ireland, and that is simply unacceptable. There is a story of a young girl who needs a spinal correction to allow her to lead a normal life. She cannot wait 155 weeks for that kind of treatment and nor should she have to, so we need a real review of what the health service is doing. Looking at waiting lists across the piece, 1,500 people in England wait for over a year, but the figure for Northern Ireland is 64,000. I almost cannot find the right word to describe that situation. It is so grossly unfair as to challenge all our imaginations, and we simply cannot say that it is okay to wait for reform.

Several of us are wearing Macmillan Cancer Support badges today because we know the importance of cancer treatment. In Northern Ireland, the cancer targets that were established in 2009 have never been met and people are waiting months to be seen. We know that any delay in the first exchanges with doctors can delay treatment and that delayed treatment causes death. I therefore have to say to the Secretary of State that the failure to allow her to lead a normal life. She cannot wait 155 weeks for that kind of treatment and nor should she have to, so we need a real review of what the health service is doing. Looking at waiting lists across the piece, 1,500 people in England wait for over a year, but the figure for Northern Ireland is 64,000. I almost cannot find the right word to describe that situation. It is so grossly unfair as to challenge all our imaginations, and we simply cannot say that it is okay to wait for reform.

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Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I am grateful to be called in this important debate and am happy to support this Bill. The measures within represent a sensible compromise, but this is like trying to find the least bad of all the really bad options. We would all agree that by far the best situation would be to have an Assembly and to have Ministers of the Executive in place taking such decisions, but that is not the situation that we are in, and it is not one, based on the dates set in this Bill, that I suspect we are going to see in the next six, eight or even 10 months. The question now is about what we need better from this Government.

2.24 pm

There are no easy options here, and the most extreme would probably be to appoint direct rule Ministers from this Parliament to take such decisions. That would lead to sensitivities in the relationship with the Irish Republic and the nationalist community, which is now represented in this House—at least not by any nationalist MPs. That is a radical decision that the Government are not keen to take. However, we could have been pursuing
other possibilities to try to get a bit nearer to a situation in which we could take some of the decisions that need to be taken. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a report that discussed how we could at least have a shadow Assembly or allow the committees to meet just to get some local engagement and local scrutiny to allow some decisions to be taken from here that have some level of accountability in Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting suggestions as to how there could be some democratic accountability even in the absence of a functioning Executive. However, just as Sinn Féin has blocked the formation of the Assembly and the introduction of direct rule, it has also made it clear that it would not even accept that level of accountability. That is where the real problem lies. Sinn Féin—the boycotters—have been pandered to for far too long.

Nigel Mills: I accept what the right hon. Gentleman says and do not pretend that any of the solutions are easy. Such issues were tested by the Select Committee, but it would have at least been worth trying to see whether we could have some sort of cross-community committees or assemblies. Even if Sinn Fein boycotted them, hopefully the other parties in the Assembly would have been willing to attend. There is a real prize here. There are decisions that need to be taken that would be of great benefit to Northern Ireland, but they will not be taken, even with the powers we are discussing here. If we could have found a compromise that got at least some of those things moving forward, it would not in any way have been a perfect solution, but it would have been better than what we have here.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is making some constructive suggestions, some of which have been made by some of us before. We have an education crisis at the moment, and many schools deplore the current funding position. Does he agree that if MLAs from across the divide in Northern Ireland were to convene in Stormont to discuss a way forward and to make representations to the permanent secretary, they may find that they have much in common and may eventually say, “Why aren’t we back in here taking the decisions, rather than letting one party block everyone else from doing things?”

Nigel Mills: That was roughly what I was alluding to in my response to the previous intervention. If we can find some way of having cross-community meetings and engagement and some sort of agreement that can then allow a decision to be taken here, that would be real progress. However, there would still need to be some Minister in this Parliament to take such decisions with the cover of that level of consent or agreement from Northern Ireland. The Bill does not provide for that.

I am pretty torn about what I would have had as my priority for this Bill. We want decisions to be taken, but we are so far from when the Executive last met that it is unlikely that most of the decisions that we want to have taken will have had any clear steer from the Executive. We therefore need some level of political decision making here when we cannot rely on previous guidance, and we would all want such things to be done by Ministers with some level of accountability and some public scrutiny, not behind closed doors.

My other concern about the Bill is whether Parliament has gone too far. We are now giving huge power to civil servants, and huge power to the Secretary of State to issue guidance that those civil servants have to follow. We are in danger of allowing a situation that we would never normally allow in England. We would all be up in arms if the Government introduced such a Bill for our constituents in the rest of the UK, saying, “We don’t really want to have Parliament scrutinising and deciding all these things. We are going to give the Secretary of State far more power to issue directions to the civil service to take really important decisions.” We would say it was completely unacceptable and undemocratic, that it weakened Parliament and that there was no public scrutiny or public accountability. We would never agree to it.

With this Bill, in effect, we have been forced to find a compromise between those two extremes of wanting decisions but not wanting to have too much power in the hands of civil servants. We have found a compromise: the Secretary of State has to issue certain guidance and the civil servants have to have regard to it. We all know what “have regard to” means. It means that civil servants have to do it unless there is very good reason not to do it.

I am probably in the same place as the Government, and I reluctantly accept that the only way to balance those competing objectives is to have this halfway fudge of advancing a little further, of pushing at the boundaries of what civil servants can decide. We get there by having guidance from an elected Secretary of State. She can encourage, advise and guide civil servants to do certain things, giving some cover from court cases. That is about as far as we can get without appointing direct rule Ministers.

Parliament should be careful to make sure the Bill contains all the protections we want to see. We may or may not have much time to debate the amendments in Committee, but some of the amendments would be helpful, because there is nothing in the Bill, for example, to stop the Secretary of State revising the perfectly reasonable and sensible draft guidance she has published to stick in some important decisions she would like to see taken. At no point in the next six, eight or 10 months—however long this period lasts—would any of us, including the Secretary of State, want to be in a situation where difficult, conflicting, controversial decisions are directed through such guidance because there is no other way of making them.

None of us would like to see hospitals being closed in Northern Ireland through guidance issued by a Secretary of State with no public scrutiny. Such things could be done through guidance, and those decisions could arguably be in the public interest if civil servants felt they were consistent with the best delivery of health services. We could see all manner of difficult things being done, consistent with this Bill, that we would not normally allow. It would be a constructive step forward if there were a provision saying that, if the Secretary of State wanted to change the guidance she had already published, the new guidance had to be published in draft so it could be
scrutinised by the Select Committee to make sure it contained nothing to which this House would not have agreed in advance of this Bill.

The Bill does not say what happens at the end of March or August, whatever period we end up with. Are we saying that this really is the last chance and that, if an Executive cannot be formed by the end of March or August, there has to be an election? We have stretched the wording of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the Secretary of State’s duty to propose an election date, for some 350 days. If we get beyond the period for which we are legislating, we cannot stretch it any further. There would have to be an election pretty much forthwith to give the people of Northern Ireland a chance to choose one or more different parties that may be more constructive in their discussions.

I would have liked the Bill to make clear the intentions of this Government and this House. The Northern Ireland Act was agreed between the parties and legislated for by this House, and the consequence of an Executive not being formed is that an election date should be proposed. We do not yet have an election date, which is the right call. An election probably would not have made any great difference over the past few months, as the same two parties would have been put back in the same position, but surely we cannot let this continue forever.

If we get to the end of March or August, is it the Government’s policy that there would then be an election and, as everyone probably thought was the case, we revert to keep trying elections until something else happens? What happens if that still fails? Would we say, “After the election there will be a period for talks, and if you cannot form an Executive by the deadline, it has to be direct rule”? Is that the Government’s plan, or do they plan to limp through until the end of March or August and revert to the position we have been in for the past 350 days?

We are trying to give certainty to the civil service and to the people of Northern Ireland about the position. It would be good to have some certainty on the consequences if no deal can be reached.

My final comments are on appointments. It has to be right that we cannot have important bodies in Northern Ireland and elsewhere not meeting and not functioning because we have not been able to appoint people to them. It makes sense to find a way to make consensual appointments with which all sides of the debate are happy, but those decisions are meant to be taken on a cross-community and cross-party basis in Northern Ireland, and they now have to be taken—I accept with consultation—by the Secretary of State in Westminster. Allowing some form of public scrutiny on the most senior proposed appointments would be helpful in giving confidence that the right people for those jobs are being appointed. Allowing pre-appointment hearings by the Select Committee for key appointments would be a positive step in showing the people of Northern Ireland that the right people are being entrusted with those important functions.

There are ways to improve the Bill but, in the current situation, it is a sensible compromise and it is the best way to achieve the competing objectives. I happily support Second Reading.

2.36 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I echo the comments of both Front Benchers on the Shankill bombing. I was 13 at the time, but I remember the incident vividly. I particularly remember the children who were killed, one of whom was also 13, which is one reason why it sticks out. My thoughts and the thoughts of my colleagues are with all those affected by the bombing and the associated attacks that followed.

I reiterate once again that we are extremely disappointed that it has come to this. We accept, rather reluctantly, that the Bill has become necessary amid the current legislative vacuum in Northern Ireland. I have just attended my first British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and I found it an extremely useful, enjoyable and sociable event. I met new people from across the UK and the Crown dependencies to discuss the important issues we face together.

Brexit, as would be imagined, was the main topic of conversation. That being said, some of the conversations about Stormont and the restoration of the Executive were rather frustrating. Many people seem to accept that meaningful talks will not resume until after Brexit, which is ultimately why we are debating this Bill today and why we reluctantly support it. However, on behalf of the SNP, I urge the Secretary of State and all parties to get back round the table with a sense of purpose and urgency. Given the importance of the European Union to the Good Friday agreement, it is imperative that Northern Ireland’s collective voice, the voice of its elected Assembly, is heard on Brexit.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, apart from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), we do not hear the voice of the majority of people in Northern Ireland on Brexit in this Chamber? The majority of people in Northern Ireland—now the overwhelming majority, according to new polling—voted for us to stay in the European Union. Does it trouble the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), like it troubles me, that we never hear their voice?

Gavin Newlands: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Lady. Sinn Féin’s decision not to use their voice is a matter for them. However, only last week the Prime Minister turned down a request to meet the four major parties that advocated a vote to remain in the European Union—Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Alliance party and the Greens.

Mr Gregory Campbell: On the parties getting round the table to try to reach agreement, does the hon. Gentleman agree that what the people of Northern Ireland and the people in this House need to hear from each and every one of the parties is two words: “We’re ready”?

Gavin Newlands: From the conversations I had in the past couple of days at BIPA, I can say that some have that desire that get back to the table. That came from all parties I spoke to—people from either community and from none. That is what I heard, but I also heard resignation that it might not happen.
Anna Soubry: It is important that we make the record clear: just as among Conservative and Labour voters there is division, so one cannot say that it is Sinn Féin that represents remainers. Many Unionists voted to remain, and no doubt many republicans voted to leave. The point is that their voice is not being heard in this Chamber.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for making that point, as I had not intended to portray it. I have spoken to several Unionists who voted remain, so she makes a valid point.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP) rose—

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson rose—

Gavin Newlands: I am going to make some progress, and then I will come back to the right hon. Members.

The people of Northern Ireland have spent too long in limbo. As we have heard from both Front Benches, key decisions have to be made and functionality must be restored. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than this. The Scottish National party, like most Members of this House, firmly believes that new talks must be established immediately to restore the Executive and Assembly. The Secretary of State has to come off the bench on this and be much more proactive, not in legislative terms—we see that today—but in leadership. Along with Irish Government counterparts, she should be working night and day to ensure that inclusive talks. With the UK Government totally distracted by Brexit and internal party infighting, I say again that an independent mediator could and, if no early progress is made, should be brought in, so that progress can be made for the sake of good governance in Northern Ireland.

Nothing must be done to undermine the Good Friday agreement, so this piece of legislation must be temporary. Given the five-month extension the Government have built into the Bill, and from conversations I have had with Members from all communities, it seems to me that there is consensus that Stormont may not get back up and running until September, following the council elections and the marching season. That is almost another full year from now, and for me and many other Members of this House that is a matter of real regret.

There is general consensus, on all sides, that this Bill has, sadly, become necessary, but there are also concerns that having to legislate at all is potentially a slippery slope and a situation that must not be allowed to drift or be extended beyond what is absolutely necessary; a political vacuum must not become the new normal in Northern Ireland. I am relieved that the Government have conceded that their Henry VIII powers in clause 4 were not justifiable, and have heeded the concerns of the House of Lords report and tabled amendments so that the affirmative procedure is used instead.

Amid ongoing austerity, the absence of decision making is straining Northern Irish public services. Decisions are urgently required to provide direction and funding to vital services. As we have heard, current conditions are placing particular pressure on health and education, which are among the most important services a Government can deliver. The collapse of the Executive and the subsequent failure to deal with the situation has also placed great stress on the civil service in Northern Ireland. Direct rule can never be countenanced, but as the shambolic Brexit process is a central reason for the ongoing crisis, the UK Government have a responsibility to ensure talks progress swiftly. The chaos within the UK Government must not be used as an excuse for the lacklustre attempts since February to re-establish political institutions in Northern Ireland. After all, this is not just about public services and appointments; it is about protecting and maintaining the peace process.

I do not want to be accused of scaremongering or of attaching more significance to this than it warrants, but yesterday the first report of the Independent Reporting Commission was published and, although there were clearly parts we can all welcome, the commission is clearly concerned about the impact of the ongoing political impasse. The report praises all those in the public, voluntary and community sectors who are working to tackle paramilitarism, but it says that the absence of political leadership has been a significant impediment to that task. It also notes that in the absence of an Assembly, new powers, such as unexplained wealth orders, cannot be introduced, and that any change in the current regime for managing paramilitary prisoners cannot be considered in the absence of a Justice Minister. I sincerely hope that in reading that report the Secretary of State has been given a renewed sense of urgency on talks.

I turn back to Brexit, as it is wreaking havoc on every aspect of politics in these islands. The broader instability caused by Brexit is a central reason why it has proven so difficult to restore the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. There are many reasons why the Executive and the Assembly collapsed, but it is Brexit, the elephant in the room, that is prolonging the concerning political vacuum. I remind colleagues across the House that March is quickly approaching and we still have no confirmation of plans to extend the period for withdrawal. The threat of a new border becomes closer by the minute.

Northern Ireland is the central conversation in the Brexit talks, so it is vital that its voice is heard. As we have heard so eloquently, in June 2016 Northern Ireland voted by 56% to remain in the European Union, as 62% of Scots did. The Government continue to try to ignore Scotland—will they also ignore the people of Northern Ireland? If the UK Government plough on with a no-deal hard Brexit, they will wreak further havoc on the businesses, public services and entire economies of all within the UK. That is nothing short of economic vandalism of the highest order.

As we have seen from reports, Northern Ireland will be hit hardest by a disastrous no-deal scenario. This month, business leaders in Northern Ireland have warned that a no deal must be avoided at all costs. According to the Government’s own figures, crashing out would shrink the Northern Irish economy by 12%. The Director of CBP Northern Ireland has warned that this would be the equivalent of another financial crisis. This would be a dramatic hit to GDP inflicted upon the people of Northern Ireland despite their vote to remain.

We in the SNP want to see stability, and strong and inclusive economic growth in Northern Ireland. We want to see Northern Ireland grow, so that public services, businesses, families and individuals can prosper. After all, not only is a prosperous Northern Ireland...
good for all who live there, but it is in the interests of Scotland, and indeed of England, Wales and our friends across the European Union. The twin threats of a new border and massive economic damage can be easily removed if the UK pursues a policy of staying within the European single market and customs union; there would be no need for new economic borders across land or at sea. Trade and relationships, business or personal, would continue to flourish between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and beyond.

In a blatant attempt to wreck any agreed backstop in Northern Ireland, the European Research Group cynically tabled reckless amendments to this legislation. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) subsequently withdrew them on Monday, saying that it would not be in the “public interest” to attach them to emergency programming. Perhaps for the first time I find myself in agreement with him and his ERG colleagues, but I would go further and suggest to him that his group and its entirely regressive aims are not in the public interest, and the less we hear from them, the better.

I remind Members that in December last year the UK Government agreed the need for a backstop in the first phase of negotiations with the EU, so they must stay true to their word.

Karen Bradley: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I wanted to make a point about the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe. He withdrew those amendments because he recognised the necessity of this Bill for the people of Northern Ireland. I thank him for having done so, because it has meant that the people of Northern Ireland, who need their public services to continue to be delivered, will be able to have that, as this Bill will not now be affected by amendments that would have served to wreck it.

Gavin Newlands: I appreciate the intervention from the Secretary of State, whom I am sure had to urge the hon. Member for Wycombe to withdraw the amendments for that reason. The simple fact is that they should never have been tabled in the first place. In order to protect the Good Friday agreement, Northern Ireland must achieve a special relationship with the EU. The SNP will never support wrecking amendments designed to undermine the backstop and, thus, undermine the Good Friday agreement. Just last week, the First Minister of Scotland said:

“we fully support the Good Friday Agreement and the maintenance of an invisible border. And so the Scottish Government will do nothing to stand in the way of Northern Ireland achieving a special relationship to the EU, if that is what is required.”

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Like the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), a majority of my constituents voted for Brexit. They do have a voice here, and I am that voice.

On the backstop, the hon. Gentleman spoke a lot about the need for economic growth in Northern Ireland, and prosperity is a key part of the peace process, so does he understand our concern that the backstop, which would create a border in the Irish sea and a customs barrier between Northern Ireland and its single biggest market—a market that produces more business for us than the European Union states and the rest of the world combined—would not be a good idea for the benefit of our economy?

Gavin Newlands: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is clear to most people in this Chamber that the answer is for all UK countries to remain in the single market and customs union, which would take away the need for any border in the Irish sea. I should add that my constituents voted two to one to remain, and they certainly have a voice in this Chamber, too.

Many Members from different parties will agree that the best option across the UK is, as I just said, continued membership of the customs union and single market, which would resolve the need for any economic borders or increased regulation. This policy, which the Scottish National party has proposed for a long time, would also act to protect jobs and livelihoods in Northern Ireland, as well as in Scotland and right across the UK. It is the only political and economic position and policy that makes sense and is achievable.

The UK must give Northern Ireland and the restoration of its Assembly the attention that it deserves and requires. The delays in the establishment of effective talks can no longer be accepted. The Government must get round the table and help to restore the Northern Irish Executive and Assembly to full functionality. The institutions of the Good Friday agreement must be championed and restored by all in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of the Division deferred from yesterday. In respect of the question relating to electricity and gas, the Ayes were 304 and the Noes were 203, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

2.51 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this Second Reading debate. May I start by expressing my admiration of and gratitude for the Secretary of State’s energy and perspicacity in trying to achieve a settlement in Northern Ireland? Whatever regrets we have about the situation in which we find ourselves, we are all united in our admiration for the energy that the Secretary of State has applied to this process. I sympathise with her, because in the actions she is taking she is trying to sail between Scylla and Charybdis: on the one hand, she must do nothing that would impede the restoration of proper democracy and the devolved settlement in Northern Ireland; on the other, she must do what she knows to be best for the people of Northern Ireland. I shall comment largely on my perception of Northern Ireland lagging well behind where it should be, and increasingly so. I shall express in unequivocal terms my fears about what that might mean in 10 months’ time, if we are no further on.

On Monday, I had the great pleasure of visiting Belfast with members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. For the first time—to my very great shame—I visited the Royal Victoria Hospital, where I talked to deeply committed and dedicated professionals who are right at the top of their game and who work there doing
their very best for the population of Northern Ireland. I must say to the Secretary of State that I came away deeply depressed, because it is clear that Northern Ireland is not getting what it deserves. In comparison with the population of the rest of the United Kingdom, it is lagging significantly behind on key healthcare indicators. We heard that morning from service users, particularly in the fields of mental health and cancer care—key healthcare areas. Were their experiences to be replicated in our constituencies, we would be very upset indeed. The reasons are complicated, but we are left to conclude that the absence for nearly two years now of Ministers capable of taking decisions is a significant part of the piece.

We are now to complicate another 10 months of potential delay, with no clear solution following that. We could call another election but, as has been alluded to already, without good will on the part of both the principal parties in this matter, it is likely as not that we would get pretty much the same outcome. I have detected no particular enthusiasm or appetite for an Irish language Act, which is the biggest roadblock to the process. I get a lot of people asking, “Why don’t I have the same healthcare expectations as people over the other side of the Irish sea?” but I do not get angst expressed to me about the inclusion of an Irish language Act. It is self-evident that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland simply want to get on with their lives. They want to have expectations across a range of public sector functions that at least approximate those that exist in Great Britain. It is a failure for all involved if they do not achieve that sort of approximation. We have a devolved settlement, so there will always be difference—of course there will and I guess we should celebrate that, but the people of the United Kingdom have a legitimate expectation that, broadly speaking, outcomes will be similar right across the piece. That is not the case in Northern Ireland, and it is getting worse. We have to work out a way to deal with that.

I welcome the Bill, but it should have been introduced to the House well before now—incidentally, that would have given us more time to consider it—because I am afraid that the situation we are currently in was predictable. We have simply lost time. In so far as it is a straightforward, simple Bill that will achieve the outcomes that the Government want, I very much welcome it, although I would have gone much further. The need to go much further is in the guidance. I hope the Secretary of State has some sense from the House that we are likely to support her in the development of the guidance in the months ahead.

I assume that the guidance is the same as that which was given in draft form to the helpful Northern Ireland Office officials who briefed the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee a few days ago. Getting hold of a copy today was quite difficult, but if it is more or less the same, I have been through it and must say that it is cast in extremely anodyne terms. It refers to decisions made by the Executive who have now folded, and to the draft programme for government and its 12 exciting outcomes, which are of course not outcomes at all but aspirations cast in the most anodyne terms imaginable.

In the weeks and months ahead, the Secretary of State will be faced more and more with Northern Ireland slipping backwards compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, unless some fairly significant policy decisions are made. I do not know the extent to which, on the basis of this Bill, it is safe for the Northern Ireland civil service to make some of those decisions, because some of them are really complicated, but they need to be made if we are to see key public services restored to the level at which they should be.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern not only about the policies that the civil servants will not implement—indeed, the Bill would not give them the powers to implement them anyhow—but that civil servants may even avoid the day-to-day functions of government, because the Bill does not instruct them to do anything? It simply says that it does not prevent them from doing anything. Given the inertia, caution, procrastination and lack of decision making that we have seen so far in the Northern Ireland civil service, there is no guarantee that any decisions will be made, even with the Bill.

**Dr Murrison:** With respect to the right hon. Gentleman, he is a little harsh on the Northern Ireland civil service, because of course civil servants will act as civil servants always do. They are not politicians, they do not do policy and they are acutely aware, all the time, of legal challenge. I take my hat off to David Sterling and his people for doing what they have managed to do since January or March 2017, but the fact is that key decisions have to be made. We have already heard about the distinction between policy and decision making; some of the decisions are policy, but some are simply nuts-and-bolts decision making. I fear that there will come a point when the line will be crossed, and the Secretary of State may very well come back here to seek further guidance from this House on what she can legitimately do to prevent the backsliding to which I have referred and hopefully start making progress on some of these key public service areas.

Reading through the guidance, I am heartened because it seems to give the Secretary of State really quite a lot of scope. She will have heard—and, I suspect, will continue to hear in the balance of this debate—a great deal of support from across the House for her being pretty proactive in issuing guidance to the civil service so that it can do what is necessary to advance the day-to-day living experience of the people of Northern Ireland. In particular, I note the enjoinder in the guidance that “particular weight” must be given to the avoidance of “serious detriment to the public interest, public health and wellbeing”.

In response to the point made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) a few moments ago, I will reflect briefly on one example, which I mention as an exemplar more widely applicable to the whole piece. At the Royal Victoria Hospital on Monday, we heard from a group of cardiologists—people who are leaders in their field—how the inability to share data with the rest of the United Kingdom was proving to be an impediment because there was a failure of a particular decision that had to be made by a Minister. That has clear implications for healthcare in Northern Ireland, because if Northern Ireland cannot compare and contrast its performance and what it is doing with other parts of a similar healthcare service, it cannot really make improvements. That is just a small example of the kind of thing that we are talking about today.
which I hope will be covered in the guidance. I urge the Minister to ensure that the guidance that she issues is much more specific than that laid out in the framework published today. I think that she will end up having to issue really quite a lot of guidance, and I urge her very strongly indeed to push the limits as far as she possibly can.

I was particularly taken with the remarks of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who speaks for the Opposition. It is actually quite rare in this place that there is much in the way of consensus. Mercifully, reaching it tends to be easier in matters to do with Northern Ireland than in most public policy areas. The hon. Gentleman’s remarks, which I very much welcome, were exceptionally positive in regard to our sense that the Secretary of State really will have to issue guidance that is as prescriptive as possible, within the scope of the Bill, in order to move things along in Northern Ireland. That is the sense that I got from the hon. Gentleman’s remarks.

I do not wish to go on too much longer, but I want to mention another point. In the Brexit context—there is always a risk that a debate like this will be overtaken by the issue of the moment—a great deal is going on in Northern Ireland at the moment that is of a unique nature. I have mentioned healthcare, but much of the economy in Northern Ireland is pretty unusual and has a uniqueness that needs to be reflected by those who are currently dealing with Brexit. Of course, it is a perfect storm in a sense, because not only is there a uniqueness regarding the various sectors; there is also a lack of an Executive—of a body advocating specifically for Northern Ireland. Now, the Government will say, “Well, it’s for us to negotiate in Brussels”, which is perfectly true, but we know full well that Scotland and Wales are separately making their points to our interlocutors in Brussels. That is not the case for Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: In relation to Brexit and the Secretary of State’s guidance following this legislation, would it not be helpful for the Secretary of State to look back at the letter signed—if my memory serves me correctly—on 13 August 2016, just months after the referendum, by both the then First Minister Arlene Foster and the then Deputy First Minister, the late Martin McGuinness? Would not that be helpful in showing the priorities that the then First Minister and Deputy First Minister felt were relevant in the Brexit negotiations?

Dr Murrison: I usually agree with the hon. Lady and I agree with her on that point. Of course, the general principle in these matters is that one relies on what has gone on before—the decisions of the Executive and so on. It would certainly be in that tradition and spirit to rely on the remarks of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister at that time, as a starter for 10.

The issue I have is exemplified by the farming and growing sector in Northern Ireland, which the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) will remember we have debated at some length in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. There are particular Northern Ireland quite apart from the border that need to be considered in the context of Brexit. It is important for provision to be made to ensure that that happens. I am not clear that it has happened to the extent to which I would like, and I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on that.

I also ask the Secretary of State to reflect on the Select Committee’s report, “Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland—dealing with the deficit”, which we published in May, and which made some helpful suggestions on how she might consult with the public and various bodies in the absence of an Executive. If this goes on and on, and she is led more and more to issue guidance and consider policy, it is helpful—particularly in the context of the Good Friday agreement, but in any event—to ensure that she has consulted as widely as possible.

If I feel a little disappointment about this Bill—a very concise piece of legislation, on which I congratulate the Secretary of State—it is because it has not really reflected in any meaningful sense the recommendations made in the Select Committee report, which is now just months old. I think that is a mistake, because some of the suggestions are pretty unobjectionable and would have helped matters along, particularly measures such as civic forums, which have been tried before quite successfully and which could give the Secretary of State the sort of confidence that she was doing things that had the support of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. That is in no way to try to subvert the institutions set up by the GFA or to suggest that they are not going to be restored, but in the interregnum it is important to get some sense of what people want. Those sorts of innovative bodies are a possible solution in the context of Northern Ireland.

We all hope that the Executive will be restored sooner rather than later—I think that the Secretary of State is as confident as she possibly can be that this will all happen within the next 10 months—but Northern Ireland is a unique and special place, and sadly we cannot necessarily guarantee that that will be the case. We therefore need—this has been mentioned previously—some idea about what will then happen.

We have to work on the assumption that a further general election will result in nothing new. Sometimes when we throw the cards up in the air, they fall down in a way that may surprise and delight us—or otherwise—but our working assumption has to be that such a thing will not change very much, which is presumably why the Secretary of State has not called an election up to this point. We will then have to decide what to do. Although I welcome the Bill, we cannot kick the can down the road. One way or another, sadly by force of circumstance, the Secretary of State may again have to start making some of the difficult, crunchy decisions that have been made in this place since 1998.

One thing is for sure: it is simply not acceptable for the people of Northern Ireland to continue to sustain the sub-optimal public services about which my Committee has heard evidence, despite all the hard work of those on the ground and all the effort to try to stop up the gap indefinitely. I sympathise with the Secretary of State in her dilemma and absolutely support her intention to get the Executive back up and running, but I sound a cautionary note and ask her to start thinking: what on earth do we do in 10 months’ time, when we are back in the same place?
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Affairs Committee. In his response to the Bill, he was, as always, considered and thoughtful. He highlighted the lack of ambition that we would ultimately like to see for good governance and for democratic decision making in Northern Ireland.

At the commencement of these proceedings, the Secretary of State made an announcement of condolences to the noble Lord Caine. May I take this opportunity, personally and on behalf of my party colleagues, to extend our condolences to the noble Lord Caine and to his mother following such a bereavement?

There has been a lot of talk so far about the Bill, and there is at least one level of consensus: it is what it is. It is not ambitious. It does not deliver good governance in Northern Ireland. It does not compel decision making in Northern Ireland. It provides no legislative vehicle for issues that require legislation in Northern Ireland. We understand and accept the position that the Secretary of State finds herself in—the constitutional barrier that she is wrestling with—but she knows that we are of the view that this place should be taking a much more interventionist approach towards the affairs of Northern Ireland and that, in that sense, the Bill is an opportunity missed.

I do, however, want to convey my appreciation to the officials from the Northern Ireland Office who have engaged directly with me and with my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) in our consideration of this Bill. I spent much more time with them than I had planned to, and I think they spent much more time with me than they wished to. I think it fair to say that, while we are where we are, it is not ultimately where they or we would wish to be in terms of how we see this Bill.

But one thing is certain: we should not be here. We should not be yet again considering how we deliver for Northern Ireland in this Chamber—it should be happening at Stormont. Although we have thus far today considered this issue only lightly, Sinn Féin Members need to end their boycott of good governance, of democracy and of participation at Stormont and here at Westminster. They refuse to allow the re-formation of an Executive; they refuse to see a meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly; and they refuse to take their seats in this House. They have shown no sign that they recognise the concerns of the people of Northern Ireland. They show no sign that they are impacted by the lack of decisions being taken in Northern Ireland. They show no sign that they are concerned about people on ever-increasing waiting lists and ever-increasing housing lists, or about the extension of our mitigation on universal credit and welfare reform that needs to be renewed next year. They show no sign of concern whatsoever.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not fair that those Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who do want to address those issues on behalf of their constituents are being punished by the Sinn Féin lock-out at Stormont? Until it is grasped by the Northern Ireland Office and by the Secretary of State that the responsibility lies at the door of only one party, and unless either the system for establishing the Executive of Northern Ireland is changed or it is made quite clear that sanctions will be imposed, this situation will continue, because there is no penalty on Sinn Féin.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. The majority of the 90 Assembly Members who have been elected to serve their constituents put themselves forward because they believe in public service, not stagnation. They are not like a puerile child participating in a game, not liking the rules, recognising they are not scoring goals, picking up the ball and walking off the pitch.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Further to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), in the discussions on the Bill with the Northern Ireland Office, we put forward a modest proposal that, to give some democratic accountability to this mechanism in Northern Ireland, the Assembly Members, on their reduced pay, should have a role in scrutinising the Departments that will exercise the decisions that fall subject to the Bill. The Northern Ireland Office told us that it was not possible to do this because Sinn Féin was unlikely to take part in such scrutiny mechanisms. Sinn Féin has a veto over even the most modest of proposals. How long are this Government going to allow Sinn Féin to veto democratic progress in Northern Ireland?

Gavin Robinson: That is an incredibly fair point to make, and I intend to address it later on. There has been a dereliction of duty. The opportunity to serve the people is not being taken by one party and one party alone. As it holds out for its purely partisan and narrow agenda, everyone else in Northern Ireland suffers.

No one should be under any illusion about our approach to these issues. In October last year, Arlene Foster, our party leader, indicated that she would seek the establishment of the Executive immediately and that if the Assembly created did not deal satisfactorily with the outstanding issues that had been raised as a stumbling block for progress, it should be brought down again in six months. She said, “Put me to the test.” She said, “Let us maturely and rationally reflect on the outstanding issues that you have; you can consider the outstanding issues that we have, and if we can’t resolve them, then bring it down—but at least try.”

Before Arlene Foster sat down from making that speech, Sinn Féin had ruled it out. It had ruled out a restoration of the Executive, where Brexit and every public service that was of interest to the people of Northern Ireland could be considered.

As I reflect on these matters, standing here again to debate a Northern Ireland Bill that should not be necessary, I am reminded that the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), said in September 2017 that nine months without a Government to steer policy had left the country with “no political direction” and left critical public service reform wanting. He continued:

“In the continuing absence of devolution, the UK government retains ultimate responsibility for good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and we will not shirk from the necessary measures to deliver that.”

That was only 13 months ago, yet here we are. He famously talked of a “glide path” to direct rule. Frustratingly, this is a never-ending holding pattern. It is not in the interests of democracy and not in the interests of good government.
The Bill has been described—kindly—as a “limited measure”. It has been described by my constituency predecessor as “a sticking plaster on a broken leg”. It has been described as a poor substitute for democratically elected politicians in Northern Ireland making decisions that affect the people they serve. It is through that prism that we have to consider the Bill.

The Bill does not provide certainty. It contains no certainty on decisions. It does not provide compellability. There is no compulsion on civil servants to make decisions that impact the people of Northern Ireland—decisions that need movement—but on key policy areas, there is no compulsion to do so. There is no progress on the 200-plus decisions that have lain in abeyance among the range of Departments since the suspension of the Assembly.

Sammy Wilson: Is the worrying thing for my hon. Friend the fact that many of those 200 decisions are sitting there not because of the court decision, but because of the inertia that exists in the Northern Ireland civil service? The Bill will not make a blind difference to the fact that some senior members of the civil service—not all—will not make a decision to get up in the morning if they think they might get some criticism for it.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comment. I think it fair to say that there are a range of views on this issue, and some accord with the description that he has outlined. There are civil servants in the Northern Ireland civil service who have been incredibly courageous during the time that we have not had democratically accountable Ministers.

But there is the rub—the Bill relies solely on the willingness of a senior departmental official who is impervious to direction and impervious to the views of politically mandated, democratically elected representatives and who can decide whether or not they wish to proceed. The guidance is there, but if we go through that guidance fairly, I think we could decide that something is within the public interest or with it at our discretion, and that is a fault.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I will expand more on this in my speech, but this is a critical point to do with the civil service. We can all criticise civil servants. There are good ones and bad ones. But, particularly in Northern Ireland—I experienced this when I was the Minister—the fear of judicial review in the civil service will not be addressed by the Bill. Bravery is fine, but if this Government do not back civil servants, there will still be fears, not about public opinion, but about whether they will be dragged through the courts, which we have seen so many times in the Province.

Gavin Robinson: That is a key consideration. The Bill does not insulate civil servants from the prospect of judicial review. We know from our experience in the courts in Northern Ireland, compared with England and Wales, that ultimately it is easier to progress a judicial review in Northern Ireland. Whether for unaccountable civil servants acting in the best interests of the country or democratically elected Ministers serving the people who elect them and the people of Northern Ireland, the challenges in the courts are still there.

The Bill seeks to replicate the understanding that was there prior to the Buick decision. I remember saying a year ago to the Minister of State that the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 empowers senior departmental officials to take decisions. Ultimately, it was considered by the courts, and the one fundamental ruling they made was that a decision of such regional significance that was controversial and/or significant should be considered by an Executive Committee. The Bill might seek to address that, but it does not absolve anyone from the legal requirement inserted through the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, which amended the Northern Ireland Act 1998, for consideration over and above the individual Department.

That was a significant safeguard injected into the legislative framework arising out of the Belfast agreement on controversial or significant decisions. In that sense, the Bill empowers civil servants to a greater level than a democratically elected and accountable Minister. That is difficult. That is my reading of clause 3(5), and it is constitutionally a troublesome step. I have to accept the position that the Northern Ireland Office has adopted, which is that it will not provide an overarching mechanism and it cannot empower officials to replace what would have been the Executive Committee, but the Bill is deficient in that regard. I am not sure that the Secretary of State or the Minister of State will be able to answer or provide any solace on that issue.

Some consideration has been given to clauses 1 and 2, on the timescales for the re-formation of an Executive. I will put on record clearly for the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), in response to the question that she raised, that never once during any of our discussions with departmental officials in the Northern Ireland Office was a date discussed. No date was discussed, and it is not politically driven. Timescales were discussed, but no specific date was ever discussed.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to follow up on that, since he referred to me. There was not a date agreed or discussed with Northern Ireland Office officials, but there was a timescale. I am not a member of the party, so I was not present at the meeting. Let all the people of Northern Ireland hear the timescales. Was it six months or nine months? What was the timescale?

Gavin Robinson: Those considerations are exactly the same ones that the hon. Lady will have had in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. The response that the Secretary of State gave to the hon. Lady was that the broad parameters were discussed by all parties. I am being honest and sincere in saying that no date was ever discussed.

Lady Hermon: What was the timescale?

Gavin Robinson: No date was ever discussed.

I see in the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) an earnest desire on his part to get progress going in Northern Ireland. He does not want to see a lengthy delay. Let us not kid ourselves. I have spent a considerable part of this speech commenting on the Sinn Féin boycott that exists today and has existed for the last 18 months and that has frustrated the meeting of the Assembly, the formation of the Executive or Sinn Féin sitting in this House.
If the hon. Lady wants an answer to this question, Conor Murphy has been quite clear about Sinn Féin’s position. When we met at the steps of Stormont in August this year and we asked, in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland, for Sinn Féin to end its boycott, Conor Murphy’s response was, “We envisage Ministers being appointed by April 2019.”

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Gavin Robinson: I will just finish this point, if I may.

It is clear that the intransigence, stagnation and unwillingness to resolve these issues has not only pertained for the last 18 months but is intended to continue. That is bad for Northern Ireland, for all the people of Northern Ireland, for the issues that remain outstanding and for the people we represent. I will give way one more time.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene again. I asked about the timescales that had been articulated by the hon. Gentleman and his DUP colleagues. I did not ask about Sinn Féin. To tweak the question slightly, can we give the people of Northern Ireland any confidence at all that the deadline mentioned in clause 1 of the Bill—26 March 2019—is realistic, or are you just going to talk your way through that deadline? Not you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Don’t worry, I recognise that. I am not going to enter into Northern Ireland politics.

I have 11 Members down to speak. If some Members are not going to speak, can they let me know? At least then I know what I am working to.

Gavin Robinson: I intend to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you knew that anyhow.

I say respectfully to the hon. Lady—an honourable Lady in name and nature—that that is a fair question, but if she follows the logic of what I am saying, she will see that it is not one for us. We want to see the restoration of an Executive. We have indicated no red lines. We made an offer of an olive branch last August, and it was rejected in 35 minutes; it was not considered. We have the clearest of clear indications from Sinn Féin that it does not envisage having Ministers appointed until April 2019. It is a disgrace, and it bears no resemblance to the needs, the frustrations, the angst, the wishes or the aspiration of every single person who lives in Northern Ireland.

I have mentioned that this Bill lacks certainty. That is a product of the way in which it is framed, and the Secretary of State has sought to issue guidance. It is right that the civil service has been empowered to advance decisions that are couched within the public interest. However, I have no certainty whether a planning decision for the power plant envisaged in my constituency will be advanced by civil servants. Why is it necessary? Because some of our older power stations are coming offline. There is a need for this planning approval to be given so that the power station can form part of a capacity auction this autumn for future years. If it is not advanced, we will be in a difficult situation in Northern Ireland. The same can be said for the north-south interconnector. It is a necessary part of infrastructure that we support—we think it is imperative for the future of our energy arrangements—yet there is no certainty that this Bill will advance a decision on the north-south interconnector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South raised the transport hub in the south of the city. It is an important project that has regional significance in that it connects every part of Northern Ireland to our city. It has significant public resource allocated to it, and it will be necessary for the future development and aspirational growth of Belfast city and Northern Ireland. Is there any certainty that this Bill will advance that decision? Regrettably, there is none. Professor Bengoa—

Emma Little Pengelly: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gavin Robinson: You know I have to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Emma Little Pengelly: I will be brief. My hon. Friend referred to the uncertainty about the transport hub in Belfast. Does he agree with me that senior civil servants should heed what has been said today by the Secretary of State? Given the consensus about this issue, there are clear indications that this is very much the type of decision that could be made and in fact, from my point of view, should be made under this guidance.

Gavin Robinson: Absolutely right. Mr Deputy Speaker, we gave time to my hon. Friend, but we have saved time on what I was about to say. This is an important point and such civil servants should take cognisance of their ability to make these decisions, and they should make these decisions.

Very helpfully and importantly, paragraph 10(c) of the guidance outlines that NICS departmental officials are encouraged to “continue to advance preparatory work” up to the point at which a ministerial decision would be required. That goes some way to addressing the point made by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). No longer can a departmental official say, “I’m sorry, we can’t advance that project or strategy, consider an alternative or engage with interested groups because we don’t have a Minister”; they can, and I think that is crucial.

As a constituency representative for Belfast East, I look to the regional stadium development fund as a prime example. The Executive agreed that they would spend £36 million on stadium development. Strand 1 of that scheme said there would be £10 million for a football club in my constituency—Glentoran football club. Officials say they cannot advance it because they do not have a ministerial decision. Well, of course they can, because it is an Executive priority, it is agreed, the consultation has been issued, the consultation responses are back, the consultation responses have been appraised by officials and they know exactly the direction of travel. Preparatory work still needs to be concluded, particularly with the Irish Football Association on the funding matrix for such a development, and that work should continue.

Transparency needs to be at the heart of this Bill. I was therefore pleased to see in paragraph 15 of the guidance a requirement on departmental officials in Northern Ireland to report to the Secretary of State monthly on any decision that has been taken under
[Gavin Robinson]

the Bill. That is really important, and it goes to the heart of transparency of government. The notion that senior civil servants could take decisions and not tell the people or that they could fail to take decisions that we know remain outstanding is one that is well worth consideration. I am pleased to see that that is included in the guidance.

There is a whole other issue that should have featured as part of this Bill. I look to the Minister to see whether he can give any comfort on this issue at all. We have no legislative forum in Northern Ireland. This is the only legislative forum in this country that can legislate on behalf of Northern Ireland, and every week, Bills go through this place that could and should be extended to cover Northern Ireland: issues that are not controversial; issues that do not cause difficulty between political parties; and issues that are normal and run of the mill. It is important that they are progressed and that we in Northern Ireland do not lose the opportunity for legislative change. We do not have any certainty that the ad hoc procedures and ad hoc approach to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in England and Wales legislation and the everybody and that should be progressed. The police want to see it happen; everybody in Northern Ireland wants to see it happen. Why can that not be progressed?

Gavin Robinson: Absolutely. The unexplained wealth orders are a key example of how we should have extension of those provisions for Northern Ireland.

I mentioned the courageous nature of some decisions, and I know that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) will agree with me that the Department of Health in Northern Ireland was incredibly courageous in making the changes required through regulation to allow for medicinal cannabis prescriptions. We wanted to see those English and Welsh regulations extended to Northern Ireland, and it has been done through another vehicle, and we are grateful for that.

Here is a key example of where it goes wrong. When the definition of co-ownership housing associations in Northern Ireland was not changed because we did not have an Assembly, but it was changed for England, Scotland and Wales, the derogation offered by the Treasury stopped. That means that if somebody does not take the opportunity to change that definitional issue now for Northern Ireland, our co-ownership schemes will not be able to use financial transaction capital tax, and it will not have the budget to provide the social houses that are required or the social mechanism through which somebody can purchase a home for the future. That is a disgrace.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Absolutely. The unexplained wealth orders are a key example of how we should have extension of those provisions for Northern Ireland.

Alastair Hamilton, the former head of the Health Department, said that the Northern Ireland Assembly could do an incredible job if they wanted to, and they could do it. We are asking the Government to do an incredible job if they want to, and they could do it. The Bill really covers only the issue of achieving to make sure that there is certainty that, when a Bill is progressing to Northern Ireland, we seize that opportunity.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I will give way one final time, Mr Deputy Speaker, so as not to encourage your ire.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: To assist my colleagues, I have withdrawn from the list of those wishing to speak in this debate, but I want to intervene on the subject of housing. In Lambeg, which is in Lisburn in my constituency, and which is famous for its drums and has some very nice housing, some former Ministry of Defence homes are available for transfer, free of charge, to a Northern Ireland housing association. That housing would provide much-needed accommodation for young couples, first-time buyers and so on. That transfer cannot be concluded because the Department needs ministerial approval. The houses are falling into disrepair. The transfer would benefit the community, and particularly young people in my constituency, but it is not happening. Is not that the kind of decision we want made, so that our constituents benefit?

Gavin Robinson: That is an important point to make, and that matter should be progressed.

I have a final, broad point about the participation of Members of the Legislative Assembly. They have been elected to serve their people and wish to do so, and MLAs are required for good governance in Northern Ireland. There are many decisions that could be taken by civil servants, but there is no direction on what those decisions should be. The only way that civil servants can get a true appreciation of what politicians who have been elected to serve the people wish the direction of travel to be is to ask them—to include a participative process, and to encourage politicians to come in, share their views, and shape policy proposals and decisions for the future. The Bill does not take the opportunity to do that. We have mentioned the historical institutional abuse inquiry. That is a classic example of where elected MLAs could be engaged in discussions on how that matter is progressed.

Nigel Dodds: My hon. Friend makes a very, very important point. The Bill really covers only the issue of Executive functions and decisions taken at administrative levels, so the whole area of legislation is left to one side—obviously. There is the issue not only of extending legislation to Northern Ireland in England and Wales to Northern Ireland, but of legislation that is sitting with Government Departments in Northern Ireland ready to go, which cannot be progressed. Earlier, somebody mentioned the unexplained wealth orders, for instance, to tackle paramilitary crime and criminal organised crime in Northern Ireland—a sensible measure that is supported by everybody and that should be progressed. The police want to see it happen; everybody in Northern Ireland wants to see it happen. Why can that not be progressed?
The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) referred to the Independent Reporting Commission, which published a report yesterday. How sad is it that, 20 years after the Belfast agreement, we still have an independent reporting commission on paramilitary activity? I have been in this House for only three years, and in that time, I have had a constituent murdered by the IRA; that is the Provisional IRA, not a dissident group. Another constituent—a serving prison officer—was blown up by dissident republicans, through an under-car booby trap bomb. He died of his injuries a week later.

People come to my constituency office every week because of the pressure that they face from paramilitaries in my community—loyalist paramilitaries; paramilitaries who intimidate young families out of their homes; paramilitaries who lend money and extort a return; and paramilitaries who sell drugs and destroy individuals and their communities. The Independent Reporting Commission report pleads for political direction and political involvement, and for the participation of the people who have been elected to serve our society and want to do so. That is the prize in restoring the Executive. That is what we want. That is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve, and though the Bill does not deliver that, it extends the time and opportunity for delivering that. It is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We have eight speeches to come, and about an hour to play with, so if speeches could be around seven minutes, that would be very helpful.

3.43 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As one of two former Northern Ireland Ministers on the Government Benches, let me say that I know how difficult the ministerial team has found it to get to this position with the Bill. The Bill is far from perfect, and it is very easy for us on the Government Back Benches—and for those on other Benches, and for the shadow Secretary of State and the shadow Minister—to tell everybody for those on other Benches, and for the shadow Secretary of State and the shadow Minister—to tell everybody what should have happened. It would be very easy to criticise—and there was a bit of criticism from the shadow Secretary of State—but the Secretary of State is dancing on the head of a pin, because without a devolved Administration in Northern Ireland, the whole area around the Northern Ireland agreement is in a difficult position.

Nobody in this House—nobody who really understands the Northern Ireland political position—would dream of having a situation in which civil servants were empowered by the Bill to progress things in a way that people in any other part of the United Kingdom would find completely undemocratic, and that would never be passed by this House. To perhaps not dance on the head of a pin, this is as close as we will get to direct rule without direct rule.

Some of the political persuasions in Northern Ireland want that to happen. They want crisis. For their own political beliefs, mostly around a united Ireland, they want to make the whole thing collapse. We are very close to that. We cannot have a situation in which the Province is brought to its knees because one group of people want one thing and another group cannot accept that.

David Simpson: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is time that we had a degree of honesty from Sinn Féin—if that is possible—about whether they really want an Assembly back, and if they do, is it only on their terms?

Sir Mike Penning: That intervention is spot on, in many ways. It cannot be on one group’s terms. The Good Friday agreement is specific that it must involve the groups coming together.

In the time I was a Northern Ireland Minister, I met people from all parts of the Province, from all political persuasions and faiths, many of them together in the boxing rings and around rugby. Not once was the Irish language raised with me during my time in the Province. It may have been raised with the Secretary of State, but it certainly was not raised with me. Myriad things were raised, including the difficult situation of the historical investigations, the health service, bridges, roads and lack of infrastructure—all being blocked because one group in the Assembly had a veto. I like to use the word “veto” because I think the public understand it better. To me, that is fundamentally wrong.

We have to ask today whether Sinn Féin want to be part of the process. If not, they should come out and say so. If they do not want the Assembly, Administration and Ministers in place, they should say so. If they do want the Assembly to sit—although it is difficult to see how it could, considering the previous comments by Sinn Féin’s political leaders—they should get into the room, sit down at the table and thrash it out like their predecessors did.

I dealt with the late Martin McGuinness. I never thought that I would get on with him. We were miles apart politically, but he was actually quite pragmatic. He wanted better things for his community—like some of the parties in the House who do not want to be part of the United Kingdom, but come here, thrash things out and are part of it. That is why I have always found the fact that Sinn Féin does not come here, take part and argue its case fundamentally wrong and undemocratic to its constituents.

Lady Hermon rose—

Sir Mike Penning: I will not give way to the great Lady, simply because I know so many other colleagues wish to speak in the debate.

The Bill worries me. I worry how amendable it is, which could impose things on Northern Ireland that are devolved matters. I accept that the Assembly is the right place. In a perfect world, I would like to see no abortion, but we do not live in a perfect world. We have abortion legislation here, and I was on the Opposition Front Bench during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008—a really difficult Bill—and we had a long debate about abortion. I personally think that a woman’s choice is important and we should allow abortion, but I would like to reduce the length of time in which the foetus can be aborted. However, it would be fundamentally dangerous to impose a decision made
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here on Northern Ireland when it is a devolved matter. I personally think that it should happen in Northern Ireland, but that is for the politicians who were duly elected there to deal with. If the amendment is passed today, it will cause chaos and division in Northern Ireland, and I shall vote against it if it is selected.

I have to say to those on the Front Bench that I have told my Whips that if that amendment were to be in the Bill, that is one reason why I would not be voting for the Bill later. But there is another reason, which is just as important. A whole group of veterans made Northern Ireland safer than it was when we went in. Many Members of this place have served in Her Majesty’s armed forces and been decorated for it. I find inconceivable the way that a British Conservative Government are dealing with British ex-servicemen. Years and years after we served and after the investigations have taken place, we are being treated like we were terrorists. That is the way we feel.

I first went to Northern Ireland in 1975, and Captain Robert Nairac, who sadly passed away there—we think, although we still do not know the exact facts of what happened to Robert—was my captain. I am surrounded by people saying to me, “Why are you”—this Government, this House—“not protecting me, rather than letting me be dragged back to a court in Northern Ireland for something that was finished years ago and of which I was found not guilty!” That form of double jeopardy is fundamentally wrong and it should be covered in this Bill. The Bill is concise and capable of containing that protection. I raised this matter at business questions last week, and the Leader of the House, in good faith, told me to go and speak to the Ministry of Defence. It has nothing to do with the Ministry of Defence; it is to do with the Northern Ireland Office and the Prime Minister, and that is the most important thing.

Emma Little Pengelly: As has been mentioned a number of times in this House, this week marks the 25th anniversary of the Shankill bomb. The person responsible for that was convicted in a court of law, but was released under the terms of the Good Friday agreement after serving just seven years for the murder of nine innocent civilians, including two children. That is absolutely appalling. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is grotesque that Sinn Féin, who defended that and fought for early release of those murderers from prison, is now going after those soldiers who were in Northern Ireland for the protection of innocent civilians, including two children. That is absolutely grotesque that Sinn Féin see their people who were doing those atrocities as combatants. They were part of their army; that is why they called them what they did. But they do not look at our veterans in the same way; actually, I think they look at them with derision. I served with Catholics from Belfast in the Army, and they could not go home—certainly, if they did, they could not tell anyone what they were doing. When I was in basic training, many of them stayed with me, with us, because they felt that they could not go back, even though they were Unionists and they wanted to serve in the British Army. Many people from the south served in the British Army. We have police officers from the Republic now who are serving in the police force in Northern Ireland. That is the sort of thing we had, but we still do not have peace.

What peace do we have in Northern Ireland? We have touched on this, and on the murders of prison officers. When I was the Minister there, David Black was shot with a weapon that most people in Northern Ireland know was an AK47, from the Gaddafi era, that was supposed to have been placed out of use and out of everything. He was shot on the M1 going to work. What sort of peace is that?

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the pursuit of people who should clearly not be pursued as they have been through a process that has long been done with. Does he agree that that matter should actually be being determined by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland? It is a clear and blatant abuse of process that old criminal lawyers will understand. Does he also agree that it is not good enough that the covenant has not been fully extended through the entirety of Northern Ireland?

Sir Mike Penning: Perhaps unusually, I agree with my right hon. Friend on nearly everything she says apart from her point about the Attorney General. British soldiers who were there to keep the peace—that is what I was sent to do—were sent by the British Government and so, in my opinion, the only Attorney General who should look at it is the Attorney General here. We were sent there not by Northern Ireland Ministers or Attorney Generals, but by those who were here. My Prime Minister at the time sent the troops. I went in ’74; there were lots before me and lots after us. It cannot be right—it cannot—that this Bill ignores what was given by so many to protect the Province.

Lady Hermon rose—

Sir Mike Penning: I will not give way, because the Deputy Speaker has already told me off once, but I will conclude.

I fundamentally think I was sent to this place to do a job—to protect my constituents and look after them, after they have looked after us. If this House is not willing to protect veterans who served in Northern Ireland, I am afraid I cannot support the Bill.

3.55 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): This is the eighth or ninth time since devolution collapsed in Northern Ireland in January 2017 that we have had so-called emergency legislation, and the Bill is arguably the most important, wide-ranging piece of all that emergency legislation. As the Minister heard, there will of course be support for it, because it is necessary to facilitate the further good governance of public services in Northern Ireland, but it is a profoundly unsatisfactory process, both in general and in particular today—the way in which we are going about delivering legislation for Northern Ireland, and the way in which this piece of legislation has been brought forward.

In the first instance, I would say that the notion that the Bill is a piece of emergency legislation is itself questionable. Of course it deals with some important matters, notably the appointment of people to the Policing Board and other boards in Northern Ireland, but Members
ought to know that the Policing Board has been without its political members since March 2017. It has now been without its independent members for almost six months. If guidance was not available in such an emergency, the Government seem slightly slow to respond. Equally, I would say that we all understand how the Buick ruling has undermined the status of civil servants and their security when taking important decisions, but that too was some months ago now, and I believe that that could have been dealt with in rather shorter order.

However, the really important point is not the question of the emergency, but the nature of the substance of the issues that we are dealing with today, because as several Members have suggested, the proposed changes are profound. It is everything short, if you like, of direct rule, but it gets as close to direct rule as we could have without calling it as much.

The guidance has been mentioned several times today. I think it was remiss of the Secretary of State to say that that guidance had been placed in the Library of the House, because it had not. It had been published online on the NIO website, alongside the legislation, but it was not referred to specifically in either the legislation or the notes to the legislation, so hon. Members such as myself who would have liked to be able to read that, as far as I am aware were unable to do so, unless we knew that it was on the website, which was not true in my case at least. I know that some people on the Front Bench and elsewhere, and perhaps the Chair of the Select Committee, and certainly some of the other political parties who were consulted, will have been given the guidance, but we were not given the guidance.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Shaiiles Vara): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: I would be delighted to give way to allow the Minister to explain.

Mr Vara: The guidance to the civil service was deposited in the Library on Monday, and it is also available today on the gov.uk website, from which other people in this Chamber were able to take copies. So, from our point of view, it was deposited on Monday. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take that at face value, and perhaps seek to retract some of the accusations that he has made in this direction.

Owen Smith: All I can say is that I went personally to the Library and asked the staff, and asked them again, and asked them to check; indeed, I also went to the Table Office and the Vote Office, and none of the people responsible in those offices said that they had a copy of the guidance. We then learned that it had been provided to other people, but only through the NIO website, from which I gather it was given to the Opposition Front-Bench team last week. I do not think that that is satisfactory, not least because the substance of the guidance is so important—the issues that the legislation deals with and does not deal with, the way in which the Secretary of State is offering guidance to civil servants, and some of the misunderstanding as to how that guidance will be provided on an ongoing basis are incredibly important.

I asked the Secretary of State earlier whether she could give me a specific example of a decision that might or might not be made by the Northern Irish civil service departments in the light of this guidance, and she could not do so. I suspect that that is because anyone who reads the guidance, as I now have, can see that you could drive a coach and horses through it. There are any number of instances that one could choose to identify in which it appears that decisions might be made in the public interest, or in order to improve wellbeing or economic performance in Northern Ireland, and, equally, there are many instances in which one might choose to interpret the legislation as inhibiting such decisions and actions.

The crucial distinction seems to involve the question of policy. However, I put it to the Minister that even if Northern Ireland civil servants cannot amend policy on an ongoing basis, one would assume that, as a corollary, they now have the capacity to make operational decisions that could be of enormous significance to citizens in Northern Ireland, relating to, perhaps, the closure of a hospital, school or some other vital facility.

The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) implied, at least, that the Secretary of State would have to provide further guidance in respect of those operational decisions that might be undertaken, but according to my reading of the legislation, that is not the case. My understanding is that the Secretary of State will publish, on a monthly basis, some reference to the decisions that have, potentially, been made, or, rather, civil servants will report to her on the decisions that they have made under the guidance, but there is no obligation on her to provide the House with details of any decisions that she is instructing civil servants to make—or objecting to their making—on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

That brings me to the principal point that I wish to make. We seem to be taking a very big step in further strengthening the hand of Northern Ireland civil servants to make important decisions. We have had practically no opportunity to scrutinise the guidance and to understand fully what it means—what its implications are not just for Northern Ireland, but for the devolved settlements across these islands. It seems to me that this is another example of the Government’s rushing through Northern Ireland legislation, characterising it as absolutely vital and urgent when in reality it deserves further scrutiny.

Lady Hermon: Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of a significant point that was made, in a very interesting speech, by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—to whom, of course, I apologise for addressing him earlier as “you” instead of “the hon. Member”. [Laughter.] The significant point in that excellent speech was the indication given by a very senior Sinn Féin member that Sinn Féin had no intention whatsoever of abiding by the timescale and the deadline of 26 March next year. What would the hon. Gentleman and his party colleagues do if Sinn Féin drove through that deadline?

Owen Smith: I am not sure that that intervention is entirely pertinent to the point that I was making. However, I will say in response to it that what I heard was a reference to Conor Murphy’s having said that he did not think Ministers would be in place before April 2019, which is broadly in line with the mysterious deadline that the Secretary of State has specified in clause 1.
My view is that no one party in Northern Ireland is blameless in respect of the impasse in which we currently find ourselves. I think that all parties need to get round the table, and that, crucially, the Governments on both sides of the Irish border need to do more to make this a more dynamic process. Torpor, drift and lassitude have characterised the approach of our Government, in particular, to an impasse that has lasted for nearly two years. If this is such an emergency, I think that the real emergency has been the lack of drive and dynamism. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) about some of the ideas advanced previously by him and by me about an independent chair, potentially the Prime Minister—maybe not the current Prime Minister, but a Prime Minister—who would have a greater influence in these matters. There are myriad ways in which the Government could be trying to drive this forward, but they are not doing so, and that causes me grave regret.

I shall conclude by making three brief points. This Bill essentially allows civil servants in Northern Ireland to take a very wide-ranging set of decisions and to be given legal and political cover by the Northern Ireland Office to do so, but it does not apparently allow decisions to be taken about the Hart inquiry recommendations on victims of historical institutional abuse, and that is morally indefensible. Hart reported just after the Assembly collapsed, but the inquiry was established by the Assembly and is widely supported across the Assembly. David Sterling, head of the Northern Ireland civil service, has said in terms that he already has the legislation on the books in order to deliver for those victims, and it is a disgrace that this legislation is not going to deal with their case. It should do, and there is no excuse for it not doing so.

Secondly, there are 500 victims of the troubles who have been gravely injured mentally or physically, as a result of no fault of their own in the vast majority of cases. They deserve a victims pension. It is clear that the compensation paid to individuals in the past is insufficient given that those people are living longer, thankfully, than was ever imagined. It is vital that the Government put in place a pension for victims.

Lastly, there is nothing in this Bill that allows for the people of Northern Ireland to have a greater voice than that represented through the DUP on the question of Brexit. The most important issue facing Northern Ireland is the prospect that the Good Friday agreement is in jeopardy right now, as a result of the reckless way in which Northern Ireland is being treated in the Brexit process. It is essential that we get the Assembly back, but if the Assembly cannot deal with it, Ministers in the NIO need to start speaking up, and I say to them, “We need to hear your voices on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland on Brexit, and if you do not speak up, you are letting the people of Northern Ireland down.”

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hand the judgment does not stand formally because the Court ruled that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission did not have the legal power to bring a case in its own name. As I understand it, that is a failure of the legislation that was passed here under the then Labour Government. The language was not clear enough in the Bill that established the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to give the commission the power to bring such cases in its own name. That issue needs to be corrected, and I am told that that would put the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on a level playing field with its equivalents in other parts of the United Kingdom. If that had already been the case, that legal judgment would have been binding, which would have helped to facilitate the local changes that are needed to ensure that the women of Northern Ireland do not have their human rights breached.

There are many more things that I would like to say. I believe that it is still worth fighting for frictionless trade across the Northern Irish-Irish border and across the Irish sea and the English channel. By finding a solution across the Northern Irish-Irish border and across the Irish sea and the English channel, we can get on with it and make sure that the people of Northern Ireland can have their human rights breached.

I am grateful that there are some exceptions, although they are small, covering planning and big investment decisions when they are non-controversial and enjoy a broad consensus and when decisions are clearly in the public interest. I put it on the record again that I welcome the Secretary of State’s clarity that a decision like that on the transport hub, which is of regional significance and critical to Northern Ireland’s economy, can be made under the terms in the legislation.

However, I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) that it is extremely disappointing that we are where we are. This is not where any of us want to be. I do not want to go into great detail, but it is worth reminding ourselves of how we have reached this point. My DUP colleagues have already articulated our frustration, because we want to get back into government to work and to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. My colleagues who are Members of the Legislative Assembly were elected to do that job, but they cannot. They, like Members of every other party, are frustrated from entering the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive by one party, but one of the frustrating things about the process thus far has been the tendency by many to look at all the parties in Northern Ireland and say, “You’re all as bad as each other. You’re all holding back progress. Why don’t you just get on with it and get back into government?”

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): I will try to be relatively brief, because my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has made a fantastic speech in which he articulated many of the issues that I wanted to touch on. I am also conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is sitting behind me, is keen to speak and to have sufficient time to articulate his issues, and I do not want to disappoint him in that regard.

I want to talk about the specifics of this legislation. I echo the words of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Belfast East in thanking the team at the Northern Ireland Office and the ministerial team for all their work and for the help they have given to me and the Democratic Unionist party team to enable us to understand better the issues in the Bill. They also gave us the space to raise our concerns and issues, some of which I will touch on today.

As already articulated, this Bill is not a perfect solution. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is far from a perfect solution, because it is so limited in what it can actually do and in the powers that it gives to senior civil servants. The context of course is that that is also difficult and troubling, because giving such powers has at its heart a democratic deficit that goes to the centre of British constitutional democracy. I will touch on that again later, not least because it is almost unprecedented in decision making in any part of our United Kingdom.

Throughout the process, from the first suggestion of this approach, the ministerial team in the Northern Ireland Office will be aware that DUP Members have expressed disappointment over the ambition of the proposals. That disappointment arose not because the Secretary of State was keen to ensure that some decisions can happen in Northern Ireland, but because putting Northern Ireland back into a pre-Buick but post-collapse position is insufficient. The legislation gives only limited scope for decision making by senior civil servants, about which the Secretary of State was frank and clear, but I
worked to try to make Northern Ireland work. It is in that context that everyone here, including on the Labour Benches, should be clear about who is causing there to be no government in Northern Ireland today. We would go back into government tomorrow morning. We are willing to turn up, and we are not asking for anything. One party is saying to every other party in Northern Ireland, “You are not going into government unless we get our demands.” That is blackmailing not just the other parties in Northern Ireland but the people of Northern Ireland who want to see issues addressed such as health, health transformation, education, necessary infrastructure and the fantastic projects happening on the ground to foster good relations—those things cannot happen.

In the main, the Bill gives unaccountable senior civil servants the power to make some decisions, and it has been acknowledged that most of them will be routine, non-controversial, low-level decisions. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) rightly said, the vast majority of the 200 decisions that have been listed are not controversial, but they cannot be taken under the terms of this Bill. That is why, right from the outset of this process, we expressed disappointment, because the time has now come that, if Sinn Féin will not move on and if they want to boycott the Northern Ireland Assembly, they should allow those who want to work to work. There need to be ministerial decisions on a whole range of important issues.

New clause 7 has received some coverage and has caused some controversy because of the two issues relating to Northern Ireland. I echo the comments of many on both sides of the House that we recognise these issues are of deep concern to many people in Northern Ireland. These issues are of deep concern to many people in my constituency. We have heard the experiences of women, particularly in relation to life-limiting conditions and fatal foetal abnormalities. We have listened to their stories and experiences, and they are incredibly difficult. I challenge anyone not to feel empathy for the very challenging circumstances in which those women find themselves.

I spoke on behalf of the DUP in the Northern Ireland Assembly just prior to the collapse on a report we commissioned, and I urged people to wait, to let us see the report and to approach the situation with compassion and care. That report has been received, and I honestly believe that, if the Northern Ireland Assembly were re-established, the report would be debated, considered and decided on where it rightly should be dealt with. The only thing holding that up is the lack of a Northern Ireland Assembly, and there would be no impediment to the Assembly getting back to work tomorrow if Sinn Féin dropped their red line.

Yes, there are some concerns about the Bill, and I conclude by addressing some specific issues for Northern Ireland. The historical institutional abuse inquiry has been mentioned, and I have frequently met victims and victims’ groups over the past seven to eight years. I have put on the record, and wish to say again, that we in the Democratic Unionist party are hugely sympathetic to what those people experienced, particularly as children, in those institutions. That is an example of an issue that needs to be addressed. A huge amount of work needs to happen on a possible redress scheme—a support scheme—and who would be eligible for it and what mechanism could be used to introduce it. But that can happen at the moment, in preparedness for a decision to be made; my understanding is that under the terms of this Bill and guidance that is the type of decision that cannot be made.

In the absence of such decisions, if there is no restoration of the Assembly, I urge the Secretary of State and her team: be a little braver, step up and make the decision to say, “It has gone on long enough.” Victims, those suffering, those in need and those sitting on waiting lists need decisions, and they need to be ministerial decisions. Although that needs to happen now and in a couple of months’ time, it needed to happen yesterday—it needed to happen a year ago. This is now urgent across such a wide range of issues.

Briefly, I wish to touch on the issue of the definition of a “victim”. I mentioned in an intervention that this week marks the 25th anniversary of the Shankill bomb, an incident that demonstrates so acutely the grotesque nature of the definition of “victim” in Northern Ireland. Under that definition, which is holding up issues such as the victim’s pension and other support, the nine innocent victims of that atrocity—that IRA act of terrorism—are gauged to be the same as the IRA bomber who blew himself up and killed himself planting that bomb on that day. That is grotesque and appalling. People right across all the political parties here and in Northern Ireland, have a number of issues they are really concerned about and care deeply about. I recognise that many care deeply about the Irish language Act, but there are many other issues to address, such as the one I mentioned. What a wrong to turn around and say to the families of those who were murdered and injured on that day, “That bomber is treated the same under victims’ schemes and victim support as the people he went out to murder.”

Connected to that is the point relating to our veterans. We do need our covenant—we need full implementation of the covenant. Northern Ireland has 3% of the UK’s population, but we contribute 7% to the Army, which is vastly higher in terms of proportion across the United Kingdom, and we do deal with the legacy. When people come back, they have done their duty and have seen some terrible things, not because they chose to go there, but because that was their job and duty. We therefore have a responsibility to do what we can to support them. We need the full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. We also need to address the issue of the disproportionate and grotesque attempts to pursue soldiers and police officers who did their duty, stood up to protect and were only there with a gun in that situation because they were placed there to protect people. We need to get that addressed urgently, and with that I will conclude.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say to the two gentleman that we need to bring on the Front Benchers just before quarter to 4.28 pm

Jim Shannon: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a comment. First, let me thank the Secretary of State for introducing this legislation. We know that the people of the Province have been held to ransom by the
wiles and machinations of an obstinate, intransigent and downright petulant Sinn Féin for too long. Other Members have said that and I want to reiterate it. It seems Sinn Féin is happy enough to be the party of absenteeism at home as well as in the UK, happy to take the Queen’s notes and not legislate, and happy to leave our country tottering on the brink. It is about time that we in this place reminded Sinn Féin that if it does not and will not do its job in Northern Ireland or here, we and the British Government will do that job for it.

My personal opinion is that we should be implementing direct rule in this legislation if an Assembly Executive are not formed within the next six months. I believe it is time we did that. For too long, we have pandered to Sinn Féin and gotten nowhere, except for in Northern Ireland Departments that are afraid to allocate money. I want to make some comments about that. Clause 3(4) states:

“The absence of Northern Ireland Ministers is not to be treated as having prevented any senior officer of a Northern Ireland department from exercising functions of the department”.

Subsection (5) makes reference to something that is not to be treated as having prevented the exercise of that function.

That all sounds right and proper, but the fact of the matter is that, although it gives permanent secretaries some function in terms of where they are, it does not go far enough. The difficulty for me came when I read the guidance on decision making. Although the principle of the legislation is to ensure that the decisions that should be taken are taken, the framework for decisions leaves a lot to be desired. The guidance says that “the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers does not prevent a senior officer of a NI Department from exercising a function of the department if the officer is satisfied that it is in the public interest to exercise the function”.

Surely that translates into, “If an official wishes to stick their neck out, this will not stop him or her.” How many officials are prepared to do that? I suspect that there are very few. It is all very well, but where does the Bill say that decisions must be made unless there is a reason not to make them? We all know the issues clearly. It is important to encourage permanent secretaries to make decisions that have been in the pipeline for too long.

This morning, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee heard about the need to recruit some 600 police officers before the end of the year. There are some plans to try to do that to bring the figures up. We also have to address paramilitarism. The Police Service of Northern Ireland is clear about what it is doing and wants to do. I am happy with the PSNI’s commitment, but will the Secretary of State say how the Bill addresses it?

Last week, I met the Unison representatives of the health workers at the Ulster hospital in Belfast. They are as annoyed as I am that in Northern Ireland we cannot access some of the drugs that we can access on the mainland. Compared with some parts of the United Kingdom, we have second-class access to cancer care in Northern Ireland. For some people, there is a backstop down the Irish sea when it comes to healthcare for those in certain parts of the mainland compared with us in Northern Ireland. I express great concern about that. Why is it that agency staff cost the health service in Northern Ireland £150 million? I suggest that that is lazy management. It is not cost-effective to spend £150 million this year on agency staff when the staff could be employed full time at a much lower cost.

What about the pay for nurses—the 6.5% over three years for the nurses? There is a backstop down the Irish sea when it comes to the nurses in Northern Ireland getting their 6.5%. Perhaps the Secretary of State will listen to this question, if that is possible: when will the nurses in Northern Ireland get their 6.5% pay increase? Will the changes in this legislation make that happen? We have been very involved with community pharmacies and we understand the issues clearly. We need to help the permanent secretary to enable the changes to take place.

Let me refer to the food-processing grant scheme and the lack of an appropriate scheme. I had a meeting with the Minister of State on this matter, which affects three of the largest employers in my constituency. When I attempted to engage the permanent secretary on the issue, I was given the following response—I quote the Minister of State, who is sitting there writing furiously:

“You have asked for a reconsideration of a decision to restrict the availability of grant to SMEs in Northern Ireland. If the measure was to be extended beyond the SME sector and the available evidence that would require a direct Ministerial intervention. There are no plans to launch this new scheme in the absence of a DAERA Minister.”

Will the permanent secretaries be able to legislate on the scheme to enable three of my large local business to take advantage of a processing grant scheme that is available on the mainland? It is available in Scotland, Wales and England, but it is not available in Northern Ireland.

On fishing, Brexit will bring us some access to our own waters again, which is good news, but we also need fishing harbours in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel that can take up the opportunities and make sure that they happen. For that to happen, we need someone in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the permanent secretary to be responsible, take those decisions and ensure that we get the second slipway at Portavogie, the large scheme at Kilkeel and the improvements needed at Ardglass, which are currently on hold.

We will always talk about our own constituencies, as I have done, but I just want to plug a project in my constituency that is still sitting in its system—the Ballynahinch bypass. Why are we not seeing progress? The bypass is ready to go and the plans are in action, including the acquisition of land, but we are unable to move the scheme forward. A Northern Ireland Water sewerage scheme for new builds is also on hold in Saintfield in my constituency. There are lots of new builds in Newtownards and Comber, and we may have to upgrade those systems as well, so I am very conscious of that issue.

I will soon draw my remarks to a conclusion, because I want to ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) has the opportunity to speak. Just before I do, I will mention the education system. Many schools across my constituency have not been able to step forward as our allocation of pupils increases. We are looking into having a new build for Glastry College, or perhaps an amalgamation of Glastry College and Movilla High School. We will have to see where that goes, but we need someone in place to make the decision. We also need someone in place to make the decisions about children’s road safety outside both Grey Abbey Primary School and Abbey Primary School in Newtownards. These are real bread and butter issues for people who want to see change.
We are frustrated with a system that unfortunately does not bring accountability. With respect to the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, who are both sitting on the Government Front Bench, this legislation does not deliver the accountability that I want to see. I challenge the Government to show that it will deliver on the education and bypasses that we need, and on nurses’ pay. We want to see accountability and responsible action from the Ministers and the Department.

I agree with the spirit of the Bill, but it is not forceful enough and will mean that decisions can be avoided. The people of the Province have lived in limbo for far too long. We deserve better; and the DUP deserves and demands better.

4.36 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is with great sadness that we are here today, debating yet another Bill that should not have to be brought to this House. Unfortunately, we are in this position because of the intransigence of one party, as has been outlined by many speakers. Sinn Féin had the opportunity to go into an Assembly with us; it will not. I am not necessarily saying that we should be dealing with talks. I think that we should recall the Assembly, and that those who are willing and want to be there should be there and take part in business. That might bring about a need to change the way in which the Assembly is set up, but—let’s be honest—we can move things whenever we have to.

This legislation is about allowing civil servants to make decisions, although many such decisions have been challenged. I appreciate that this comes on the back of the Buick ruling, associated with the Mallusk incinerator site—I use the term “incinerator” because that is what it is—and because of that, we have ended up with many civil servants looking for reasons not to make decisions, instead of for reasons to make them. Unfortunately, the people of Northern Ireland suffer as a result.

It is vital that we move forward positively. We do not want to go back to where we were in the past, as has been mentioned by previous speakers. We have moved on quite a bit in the last 20 years; we do not want to go back, nor do we want to be held to ransom by the implementers of some of the troubles or those who brought about some of the atrocities in our Province.

There are difficulties associated with some of these decisions. Many are simple, straightforward and uncontroversial—many of which are associated with major infrastructure. The difficulty is that people have attempted to put something in this Bill that is very controversial to people of Northern Ireland, and we should not be trying to muddy the waters on that matter. I appreciate that it is a difficult situation, and that many people have suffered because they are having a baby who may be born with a life-limiting condition. I understand and appreciate that, but we should not have to attach it to this Bill. If we get an Assembly up and running, these decisions should be made there. These items should not be made red lines before entering into a Government; they should be debated on the Floor of a Northern Ireland Assembly and addressed democratically through that process.

We missed another opportunity in not including something associated with the past—the way that the military have been hounded in relation to what happened when they were trying to bring about peace in Northern Ireland. They were there as custodians of the British Government to ensure that we were able to sleep in our beds at night.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My hon. Friend refers to our esteemed and brave members of the military. There is a lot of talk about heroes of the peace process—does he agree that they are the real, unsung heroes of the peace process?

Paul Girvan: I have to agree with my hon. Friend—that is 100% right. I am from a family who have been affected directly. Many members of my family served in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately we suffered as a consequence of that and are still suffering today.

We have missed a shot in moving these matters forward. However, I do appreciate the work that has gone into trying to bring forward something that will potentially provide an opportunity for some decisions to be made. Not that many weeks ago, we passed a pay rise for the teachers. There was an excuse that that cannot be passed across to Northern Ireland, but we will get a Barnett consequential in the next Budget should we have a mechanism to pass that pay rise on. I believe that this Bill will give civil servants and permanent secretaries the opportunity to make those decisions and pass on those pay rises, which are long overdue.

We have had a long debate on this matter. I hope and pray that this will be the last time that we have to bring to this House such a piece of legislation that would normally be addressed in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Let us hope and pray that we have that Assembly up and running, making decisions, in the near future.

4.42 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): During the course of this afternoon, two common threads have emerged that have run through all of our discourse. One of those is the unflagging courtesy and respect with which Members have addressed each other across the Chamber. This has been an occasion not for people trying to score parochial or party political points but to try, really try, actually to achieve what is best for those we care the most for: the people of Northern Ireland; the people of this United Kingdom. The second thread is the sadness that we are here at all, as has been expressed so eloquently by so many Members, and the feeling that we have somehow failed as politicians and as legislators because we have had to bring this Bill before us.

The opening comments by the Secretary of State will have engendered great sympathy from across the House and, I should imagine, outside it. She took a huge number of interventions, and she spoke entirely honestly and from her heart. The conclusion that I drew from her words was that if there were any other way of proceeding, we would take it—if there were any other possible mechanism, that is the mechanism we would seek—but we are in a situation where it is simply impossible to continue, and not just because of the great long list of concerns that have been expressed.

If anyone thinks that there is any shortage of urgency about addressing those concerns in Northern Ireland, they should have a look at the briefing paper put out by
the House of Commons Library, which lists page after page of long-outstanding issues. We know all about the A5 and the York Street interchange; we know about nurses’ pay and the NHS. We know about all these issues, but we cannot do anything about them. There is the issue of dormant bank accounts. There are things that would be so good for the people of Northern Ireland. We must somehow break this logjam and move forward. Of course, in an ideal world, we would have an Ireland. We must somehow break this logjam and move forward. Of course, in an ideal world, we would have an Ireland. We must somehow break this logjam and move forward.

We have to do something now. We have to do something now.

We should pay credit to David Sterling, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service. There are some pretty tough jobs in the civil service, but his has to be one of the toughest. He has said on the record that he needs to be given legislation, to give “greater clarity and certainty” to decisions, not just because of the decision of Mrs Justice Keegan in the Mallusk case, but for the whole operation of the Northern Ireland civil service. We are asking them to carry the ball when we are not prepared to give them cover.

The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Morrison) referred to the Secretary of State as sailing a tight and narrow course between Scylla and Charybdis. He may have been piling Pelion on Ossa when he made that statement, because I think we tend to know that, but that is exactly it—the Secretary of State has been walking on eggshells. What we have here is not an attempt to give a blank cheque and carte blanche to the Northern Ireland civil service, but an attempt not to restrain them and constrain them in such a way that they can do nothing. There will be an element of accountability. There will always be judicial review, and there will always be very active local Members in Northern Ireland who will not be silent if matters are failing to be raised.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), referred to a poverty of ambition. I think, in all sincerity, that we could be more ambitious. At the moment, we are firefighting; we are responding to crisis. I do not see that we are laying out alternatives and ways in which we can move forward. The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) asked, “What can we do best?”, and that is the question we must ask ourselves. At the moment, we are providing cover, and we are allowing the civil service to act, but we are not solving the problem or resolving it in any way whatsoever.

I think the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke for us all when he said that the Bill is accepted reluctantly. I think we all accept it, but with great reluctance. In the intervention from the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), he referred to two words that echo throughout Northern Ireland. I have to say, there are two words I have always associated with it in the past—the first is “No” and the second is “Surrender”. I am glad we have parked that and moved on. Now the two words are, “We’re ready!” and I am delighted to hear that.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), whose constituency I have had the enormous pleasure of visiting with him, called for a more interventionist approach. He is absolutely right, and I agree with that. It must be so desperately frustrating that the community groups and organisations he works with are being starved of funds and resources and starved of that accountability and link to legislation. He is doing everything he can. If only we could do more to help him. Sadly, the words that I remember from him are, “we are where we are.”

That is the tragedy, but we have to get from where we are to somewhere forward.

I had the great honour of shadowing the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) when he was a Minister. He is one of eight Ministers I have shadowed over the years; I do not know whether the fact that they all sought promotion immediately afterwards has anything to do with me. He spoke from a position of knowledge. He is held in great affection in the House, and we wish him well in everything he does.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) talked about torpor, drift and lassitude, which sounds a bit like a firm of solicitors in Swansea. I know exactly what he means—torpor, drift and lassitude are, in some ways, the characteristics that are seen from outside.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) spoke from an Omagh background. I welcome her to our regular sessions here on this subject. We are always looking for new input. Her comments were very emotionally grounded, and we all respected them.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), in a typically excellent and elegant speech, referred to the democratic deficit. She also talked about an unaccountable civil service. I am not entirely sure that the civil service is unaccountable. I think it does operate in daylight, and there is transparency. The main point she made—this is one thing that none of us must ever forget from this afternoon’s deliberations—was about the implementation of the Hart report. We simply cannot allow the Hart inquiry report to lie on the table. It is too important. She spoke with such passion that I challenge anyone not to bend their every sinew to try to achieve the implementation of that report.

I have to say that I have never heard the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) speak faster. I have a terrible feeling that a new category in the Olympics has recently been introduced—speed talking. I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman, and did he not quite rightly say that this is about bread and butter? This is indeed about bread and butter.

I think the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) spoke for all of us when he said—that be the coda of this debate—that we do not want to be going back. We do not want to go back, we will not go back, we cannot go back: Northern Ireland deserves better. What we do this afternoon is not going to resolve the problem, but it will be a small step on the way and will allow some element of normality. Above all, however, we must never, ever go back.

5.50 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Shailesh Vara): May I start on a rather sad note? I extend my condolences and sympathies to Lord Caine, who is known affectionately to all of us as Jonathan Caine. Jonathan is a friend of mine and I have known him for many years. I think all of us in the House would agree that, as far as Northern Ireland issues are concerned, Jonathan is the fount of all knowledge and the one we go to because he knows all the answers. At this difficult time, we extend our sympathies to him and his family.
The intention of the Bill is to create a time-bound period for intensive efforts to restart political dialogue, which might enable the Northern Ireland political parties to form an Executive at any time, as well as to support essential decision making during that period and to ensure that key public appointments can be made until an Executive are in place.

Bob Stewart: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way this time, but I am mindful of my limited time.

Bob Stewart: The Secretary of State mentioned that she was going to get the parties together. Have Ministers seen one small glimmer of hope that Sinn Féin will actually come to the table and start helping everyone to govern in Northern Ireland?

Mr Vara: There have been occasions when Sinn Féin representatives have turned up at meetings. I very much hope that my hon. Friend will take it on board that the last time we had direct rule it was for five years, and the time before that it was for 25 years. We owe it to ourselves, but more importantly to the people of Northern Ireland, that no stone is left unturned. We are bringing in this Bill to ensure that we can have some space and time during which to get those talks up and running again to try to get the Assembly functioning for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

We have heard from a number of speakers, and I wish to thank all of them. If at all possible given the time constraint, I wish to make brief comments about all the speeches. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), made a very thoughtful speech. May I say that we very much welcome his broad support for the measures we are introducing? He was critical of the time periods, but I would simply say that we must have the time periods we feel are necessary to try to get the flexibility we may need if the talks reach a particular stage. As I say, it is so important that we get a functioning Assembly. He also mentioned the case of Sarah Ewart. He will understand that there is a long-standing convention in the House that it is inappropriate to make comments about ongoing cases, and I hope he will take that on board.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) raised concerns about the guidance given to the Northern Ireland civil service. I say to him and to others that we very much welcome comments from people—especially those, like him, who are on the Select Committee, but also others—who wish to make a contribution.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) urged the Secretary of State to work night and day to try to get the Assembly up and running. I can assure him that that is precisely what she has been doing since the day she became Secretary of State, and I can also assure him that she will continue to do that. We welcome the support that he and his party are giving to this measure.

The Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Morrison), gave a very detailed speech, rightly highlighting the lack of decisions in Northern Ireland in the absence of Ministers and the impact that that is having on the ordinary citizen. That is why it is so important that we pass this Bill to allow the facility to try to get the Assembly up and running. Again, he made reference to the guidance given to the Northern Ireland civil service, and I say the same to him that I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley that we would welcome any comments that he may have.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) gave a learned speech in which he praised, quite rightly, the civil service in Northern Ireland. May I add my praise to the wonderful work of David Sterling and his team—all the permanent secretaries and the thousands of civil servants who have worked to keep Northern Ireland going for the past 20 or so months? He rightly pointed out the transparency of decisions, and will have noted that that is provided for, which is important. He specifically asked about ongoing legislation in this Chamber. I can confirm to him that this Government will continue to take steps to introduce and extend legislation to Northern Ireland following careful consideration on a case-by-case basis. We have done so to date, balancing the public interest need with our respect of the devolution settlement and fully restoring the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland.

The speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) clearly reflected his experience of Northern Ireland. He spoke of the need for determination to get the Assembly up and running again. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) gave a characteristically feisty speech. I have to say that, although there have been various comments and reservations about the Bill, I was somewhat disappointed that he could not bring himself to give broad support for what we are doing, but instead concentrated his entire speech on being critical. That is matter of regret for the whole House when we seek to get the best for the people of Northern Ireland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) gave a passionate speech full of feeling. She spoke about the importance of the Good Friday agreement. I agree with her entirely on that importance, and on the fact that we wish we were not in this place right now and that we were not having to pass this legislation, but, as has already been said, we are where we are.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) also made the point that this is not where we want to be, but we are here and therefore it is necessary to get this Bill through, and it is good to have the broad support of the House. She spoke of the need for ministerial decisions. We recognise that there should be ministerial decisions, as those decisions are vital to the people of Northern Ireland. That is why this Bill allows us the opportunity to try to get the parties to think again around that table and to get the Assembly running.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave a detailed speech. Again, I note his concerns and reservations, but, broadly, he agreed with the spirit of this Bill and that is welcome. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) rightly spoke about the issues that really are for the devolved institutions to tackle. That is why, as I have said, it is important that the whole House is united in trying to get the parties to make sure that the Assembly is functioning.
The UK Government would have very much preferred it if the parties had reached an accommodation and formed an Executive by now. In the absence of such a development, action must be taken. This is to ensure that we can have the protection of the delivery of public services by giving the Northern Ireland civil service certainty to take decisions in the absence of an Executive and also to keep key bodies and offices functioning properly by ensuring that appointments can be made to them.

This really is an important Bill, and we introduce it with reluctance, but we are doing so with the best of intent to get the best for the people of Northern Ireland. I therefore urge that this Bill be read a Second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister asserted that the respected Oxford economist and professor, Simon Wren-Lewis, said, in reference to Labour’s manifesto, “the numbers did not add up”.

However, Professor Wren-Lewis disputes the accuracy of those remarks. He issued the following comments this afternoon, and I would like to be clear that these are the professor’s words, not mine:

“Apparently the Prime Minister quoted me saying about Labour’s 2017 manifesto ‘the numbers did not add up’ In fact I said ‘Let us suppose the IFS was correct’ and examined consequences. I have never taken a view on whether they did/didn’t add up. If that is what she said, she”—

he goes on to use a word that I am unable to use, regarding the incongruous relationship between the Prime Minister’s comments and the truth. I just repeat that those are the professor’s words, not mine.

Would it be appropriate for the Prime Minister to come back to this House to correct the record and apologise to the renowned professor in question? May I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the best course of action?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he knows, and as Mr Speaker always says when dealing with such points of order, what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box is not a matter for the Chair. I am quite sure that whatever the Prime Minister said today, she said in good faith, but the hon. Gentleman wishes to bring another version of that to the attention of the House, the Prime Minister and her Ministers. By raising this point of order, he has succeeded in doing that.

As for when the Prime Minister will come back to the House, I am quite sure that, in the normal course of events, she will be back here soon—certainly by next Wednesday, when of course the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will have the opportunity to ask her about this directly, and I am sure that he will take that opportunity.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister’s questions today, the Leader of the Opposition asserted that the number of those on zero-hours contracts was going up. In actual fact, the figure is going down. Is there an opportunity to draw that fact to the attention of the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: First of all, that was not further to the point of order. Just as the Chair has no responsibility or control over what Ministers say in the House, so they have no responsibility or control over what the Leader of the Opposition says in the House. I say the same to the hon. Gentleman as I said earlier: facts are being disputed, and I am quite sure that he will question the Leader of the Opposition closely the next time he has the opportunity to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I, too, raise the point that the Leader of the Opposition claimed today that record numbers of people were on zero-hours contracts. That is false according to the House of Commons Library, which makes it very clear that the number has dropped from 903,000 to 780,000. How does one clarify the matter, in order to ensure that the Library remains a trusted source of data?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady makes a very important point, because we all rely on the Library to give us balanced—

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Jeremy doesn’t.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Do not interrupt me. We rely on the Library to give us balanced and entirely impartial information, but once again, once a Member of this House has information in his or her hand, the way that they present it, and the arguments that they make with it, is a matter for them. The hon. Lady asked how she can draw this matter to the attention of the world in general; she has just done so most effectively.

Would anyone else like to continue Prime Minister’s questions? We have a very important Bill in front of us, and I do not wish to take any further time out of the limited amount left for it.
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill
Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ELEANOR LAING IN THE CHAIR]

Clause 1

EXTENSION OF PERIOD FOR EXECUTIVE FORMATION

5.5 pm

Nigel Mills: I beg to move amendment 15, page 1, line 16, at end insert—

'(4A) If the period mentioned in section 16(A)(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as modified by subsection (1), ends without the Ministerial offices having been filled section 32 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 has effect as if for subsection (3) there were substituted—

(3) The Secretary of State shall within 7 calendar days of the end of the period mentioned in section 16(A)(3) set a date for the poll for the election of the next Northern Ireland Assembly. The date set shall be no later than 3 calendar months after the end of the period mentioned in section 16(A)(3).'

This amendment would require elections in Northern Ireland to be called if Ministerial offices are not filled by 26 March 2019.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause stand part.

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 20, leave out paragraph (b).

This amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from extending the deadline for appointment of Northern Ireland Ministers without the approval of Parliament.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 22, in clause 3, page 3, line 2, at end insert—

'(1A) In the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, senior officers of Northern Ireland departments, giving due regard to advice from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, shall prepare a scheme to provide a pension to those who are regarded as seriously-injured arising from an incident associated from the conflict in Northern Ireland.'

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to have regard to representations from MPs as well as MLAs before publishing guidance.

Amendment 19, page 3, line 7, at end insert—

'(9A) If the Secretary of State wishes to revise or amend the guidance, they must write to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee before changing the guidance. This amendment is linked to NC4 with the intention of requiring Northern Ireland Departments, in the continued absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, to promote credit unions in Northern Ireland.'

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to consult the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee before changing the guidance.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 38, at end insert—

"Northern Ireland Affairs Committee" means the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons and—

(a) if the name of that Committee is changed, is to be treated as a reference to that Committee by its new name, and

(b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, is to be treated as a reference to the Committee by which those functions are exercisable.'

This amendment defines the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons for the purpose of Clause 3.

Clause 3 stand part.

Government amendment 23.

Amendment 6, in clause 4, page 4, line 26, at end insert—

', publish the advice received and write to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to notify the Committee of the appointment decision prior to the appointment being made.'

This amendment requires the relevant Minister of the Crown to notify the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons before exercising an appointment function in relation to a specified office.
Amendment 16, page 4, line 26, at end insert—

'(5A) Before exercising an appointment function in reliance on subsection (1) in relation to a role with an annual salary of £100,000 or more the relevant Minister of the Crown must refer their recommendation for the appointment to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons for a pre-appointment scrutiny hearing.

(5B) The Minister of the Crown may not proceed with the appointment referred to in subsection (5A) for a period of 30 calendar days from the date of referral to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons.

(5C) Any reference in this Act to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons—

(a) if the name of that Committee is changed, is to be treated as a reference to that Committee by its new name, and

(b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, is to be treated as a reference to the Committee by which those functions are exercisable.

(5D) Any question arising under sub-paragraph (5C) is to be determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.’

This amendment would require the more highly-paid public appointments to be subject to scrutiny by the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons.

Clause 4 stand part.

Amendment 7, in clause 5, page 4, line 36, at end insert—

’, publish the advice received and write to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to notify the Committee of the appointment decision prior to the appointment being made.’

This amendment requires the relevant Minister of the Crown to notify the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons before exercising an appointment function which normally require consultation with, or the consent of, Northern Ireland Ministers.

Clause 5 stand part.

Amendment 8, in clause 6, page 5, line 7, at end insert—

’, publish the advice received and write to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to notify the Committee of the appointment decision prior to the appointment being made.’

This amendment requires the Secretary of State to notify the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons before exercising an appointment function which is normally exercisable by Northern Ireland Ministers acting jointly with the Secretary of State.

Clause 6 stand part.

Amendment 9, in clause 7, page 5, line 34, at end insert—

‘“Northern Ireland Affairs Committee” means the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons and—

(a) if the name of that Committee is changed, is to be treated as a reference to that Committee by its new name, and

(b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, is to be treated as a reference to the Committee by which those functions are exercisable.’

This amendment defines the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons for the purposes of Clauses 4 to 6.

Government amendment 24.

Clauses 7 to 10 stand part.

New clause 4—Guidance on exercise of departmental functions: credit unions—

'(1) The guidance published under section 3(2) must include guidance on credit unions.

(2) Guidance under this section includes, but is not limited to,

guidance to—

(a) senior officers of the Department for Communities in the exercise of their functions in relation to—

(i) promoting and protecting the interests of children, older people, people with disabilities, and other socially excluded groups; and

(ii) providing emergency financial assistance; and

(b) senior officers of the Department of the Economy in the exercise of the functions in relation to—

(i) business regulation including consumer affairs services, (ii) mutual policy, legislation and operations, and

(iii) the social economy.

(3) Guidance under this section must include the promotion of credit unions in Northern Ireland to combat organised crime, to reduce financial exclusion, to assist the social inclusion of marginalised groups and to promote financial well-being in all parts of Northern Ireland.’

The intention of this new clause is to require Northern Ireland Departments, in the continued absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, to promote credit unions in Northern Ireland.

New clause 5—Guidance on exercise of departmental functions: energy co-operatives—

'(1) The guidance published under section 3(2) must include guidance on energy co-operatives.

(2) Guidance under this section includes, but is not limited to,

guidance to—

(a) senior officers of the Department of the Economy in the exercise of their functions in relation to—

(i) energy policy and legislation;

(ii) sustainable energy, including energy efficiency measures;

(ii) assistance to the gas and electricity industries;

(iv) Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme and associated costs;

(v) the social economy; and

(vi) making certain payments to the Department of Business, Energy and Industry Strategy; and

(b) senior officers of the Department for Infrastructure in the exercise of their functions in relation to energy matters.

(3) Guidance under this section must include the promotion of energy co-operatives in Northern Ireland to combat fuel poverty and to encourage the safe, sustainable, affordable and efficient production and consumption of energy in all parts of Northern Ireland.’

The intention of this new clause is to require Northern Ireland Departments, in the continued absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, to promote energy co-operatives in Northern Ireland.

New clause 6—Guidance on exercise of departmental functions: housing co-operatives—

'(1) The guidance published under section 3(2) must include guidance on housing co-operatives.

(2) Guidance under this section includes, but is not limited to,

guidance to senior officers of the Department for Communities in the exercise of their functions in relation to—

(a) loans for certain home improvement loans;

(b) housing led regeneration;

(c) regulation of the NI Housing Association sector;

(d) urban regeneration including services such as property maintenance and events;

(e) community and voluntary sector;

(f) grants to district councils in support of local services and transferred functions;

(g) built heritage; and

(h) grants and grants-in-aid.
(3) Guidance under this section must include the promotion of housing co-operatives in Northern Ireland to combat poverty, family breakdown and social exclusion and to encourage the provision of safe, sustainable, affordable and energy-efficient homes in all parts of Northern Ireland.’

The intention of this new clause is to require the Northern Ireland Department for Communities, in the continued absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, to promote housing co-operatives in Northern Ireland.

New clause 7—Equal rights for people of Northern Ireland (No. 2)—

(1) In the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers to address the matters identified by recent, current and future court proceedings in relation to the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State must issue guidance to senior officers of all Northern Ireland departments which will specify how to exercise their functions in relation to—

(a) the incompatibility of the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland with the continued enforcement of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 with the Human Rights Act 1998, and

(b) the incompatibility of the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland with the continued enforcement of section 13(e) of the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978

where they pertain to the provision and management of public services in Northern Ireland.

(2) The Secretary of State shall report guidance under this section on a quarterly basis to the House of Commons and set out her plans to address the impact of the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers on human rights obligations within three months of the day on which this Act is passed.

This new clause would increase accountability of the Secretary of State and senior officers of Northern Ireland departments for their role in ensuring human rights compliance in Northern Ireland, in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, by requiring them to address incompatibilities between legislation applied in Northern Ireland and human rights obligations.

Nigel Mills: May I first apologise for being a little late for the wind-up speeches on Second Reading? I was sorry to miss the speech by the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), the shadow Minister, as his speeches are usually entertaining and informative.

Amendments 15 and 16 are efforts to probe the Government on the future direction of policy in certain areas and perhaps to improve the Bill, but I will not seek to press them to Divisions. Amendment 15 is an attempt to discover the Government’s plan if—heaven forbid—we reach the end of the period for the formation of the Executive and we still do not have one. Effectively, what would happen in law without any further clarification is that we would default back to the present situation—the Secretary of State would have a duty to consider setting an election date. The present interpretation seems to be that she has no duty to call an election for any particular date. The House of Commons and the people of Northern Ireland have been very patient for the past 650 days—that was the count we heard earlier—in not pressing the Government to clarify the meaning of the words on considering the date for an election in the legislation of a decade ago.

We may fairly say that if we manage to get to late August 2019—I cannot calculate the number of days, but I suspect it will still be well over 650 days since an election by that point—without a Government being formed, the only solution might well be to have another election and see whether the people of Northern Ireland wished to express a different view from the one they expressed 650 days ago. If we get to that stage, I would argue that an election would be unavoidable unless we really believed that another few days would tip a deal over the line.

I also venture to suggest gently that having clarity in the law about the consequences for the parties if they cannot reach a deal by that point may be of some assistance in the negotiations. It is probably fair to say that the Northern Irish parties are not great respecters of deadlines. Indeed, deadlines in this process seem to come and go without provoking much action. If a deadline were set in law, it would be clear throughout the discussions that an election would be called if the parties could not reach an agreement by the end date of late March, or late August or somewhere in between that the Secretary of State sets.

Actually, whether to call an election would not be a matter for the Secretary of State’s discretion: it would be a matter of law that the election had to be called unless she thought that she could get a new piece of legislation through Parliament to delay or remove that obligation. If a deal were about to be reached and some legislation here were needed to bring it about, I do not think that we would have any problem in agreeing to it. We would all be grateful to do anything we could to bring the Executive back. But a line would be drawn in the sand to make it clear that if the parties do not agree by a certain date, the Secretary of State has no option but to call an election to ask the people their opinion on resolving the situation.

I ask the Government to consider at least clarifying the consequences of the period for Executive formation lapsing without success and the Government’s policy in that regard. Setting out clearly in a way that will not be ignored this time that an election would have to follow might offer some assistance in the negotiations.

My other proposed amendment, amendment 16, concerns the appointment of individuals to certain key bodies in Northern Ireland. Ideally, that would be a decision for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly and there would be some cross-community involvement. It would be a joint decision, effectively. The Bill quite rightly takes the power to make those appointments, but effectively leaves the decision to the Secretary of State without the need for any real consultation with Parliament or the public on those decisions. I accept that we do not need to have that level of parliamentary involvement for every appointment that might be needed, but what I am trying to do through the amendment is ask whether for the most senior and important posts we could in some way have some parliamentary scrutiny of the individual whose appointment is recommended. This is not a novel process. Many Departments allow Select Committees to hold scrutiny hearings for proposed senior appointments, so it would merely replicate that process.

Attempting to get the amendment in order, I suggested that the definition of seniority could come with a salary of £100,000, but I would not be particularly committed to how we define the cut-off. However, if we were to have this process for sensitive appointments, I think that that level of salary would catch a new Chief Constable, if for some reason one was needed, or perhaps the chair of the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland.
For those very sensitive and senior posts for which there is cross-party concern about the individual who is appointed, having a parliamentary scrutiny process in which questions could be asked of the individual to discuss any past roles they have had or comments they have made and to seek their views on how they would carry out their burdensome responsibilities would give both Parliament and the people of Northern Ireland some comfort that the right person had been found and that they would discharge those responsibilities in a responsible manner.

Even if the Secretary of State is unwilling to accept what I have proposed, I urge her to give serious consideration to whether it would help those individuals to have the full confidence of Parliament and the trust of the public in discharging their roles if she allowed some public scrutiny and accountability in the process of appointing them.

Gavin Robinson: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that that is not what would happen if there were a functioning devolved Assembly and that putting some of those positions through that political prism brings some difficulties with it in the Northern Ireland context? If an appointment were rightly made to the Policing Board, it would be for the board to assess and judge any individual going for the Chief Constable role. With the police ombudsman, there is no public scrutiny role like that which we have seen through the process for US Supreme Court judges available at the moment. That role does not exist at the moment; it did not exist when we have seen through the process for US Supreme Court judges available at the moment. That role does not exist at the moment; it did not exist when the Assembly sat, so is it really the road we should go down on this interim basis?

Nigel Mills: I said that I was not necessarily fixed on how we define the roles, but we are not in a normal situation. We do not have the Executive or the Assembly to make those appointments; what we will end up with is a Secretary of State over here, with no accountability and no cross-community input, simply making that decision. I was suggesting that this would be a way to provide at least some scrutiny and accountability for these important appointments. The Bill to which we have just given a Second Reading actually specifies that the Secretary of State can effectively make those appointments herself. I accept that we cannot replicate every process that the Executive would have followed, but I am attempting at least to find some way to improve the situation over that which we have in the Bill.

Perhaps I can make a few remarks on the amendments tabled by the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). It seems a bit discourteous to talk about his amendments before he has had a chance to discuss them, but this is my only chance so I guess I will do it anyway. Amendment 2 suggests some items that could be included in the Secretary of State’s guidance to the civil servants on which we currently discussing, ruling and indeed appealing. They are indeed human rights issues; and they are indeed human rights issues. I hope that Members across the House who have already supported the new clause will recognise that it is an incredibly reasonable request to put to the Secretary of State, about an incredibly important issue for the House, and indeed for many people in Northern Ireland.

I do not intend to speak for long, because many others wish to get in. I simply want to set out three important points about this reasonable new clause—first, how it respects devolution; secondly, why it addresses issues that cannot simply be left any longer; and thirdly, how we believe it has relevancy to this House and the obligations of Members of this House as part of the Good Friday agreement.

The new clause requests the Secretary of State’s acts to be held to account because of what the Bill does—it recognises that since March 2017, we have not had an Assembly in Northern Ireland. Interjection. January 2017: I apologise to the Secretary of State. It has been too long for residents of Northern Ireland not to have a functioning Government, and it has an impact on their lives. The Bill recognises that resolving the dysfunctions behind that is far ahead of us at the moment, and so gives powers to the Secretary of State and to the civil servants to exercise the functions of Government. Interjection. It does give power to the Secretary of State because it gives her guidance powers; I believe those are quite powerful, and the new clause speaks to those powers.

For avoidance of doubt, the new clause would not create a new law in Northern Ireland, but it would recognise that there are thousands of people in Northern Ireland whose lives, right now, are affected by two key human rights issues; and they are indeed human rights issues, because they are issues on which our courts are currently discussing, ruling and indeed appealing. They refer in particular to a person’s right to marry who they love, and also to the right of women to have bodily autonomy—to make the choice, if they so wish, not to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. Both of these have been subject to court action, because we recognise that in Northern Ireland they have different rules.
Let us talk about the consequences of those rules. When it comes to abortion, we know that right now in Northern Ireland, if you are raped, and you become pregnant as a result of that attack, and you seek a termination, you could face a longer prison sentence than your attacker. We know too that gay couples in Northern Ireland, when they step off the plane, no longer have their relationship respected in the way that any of us would wish our relationship to be respected. They do not have equal marriage in 2018.

Both of these sets of circumstances come about as a direct result of legislation that was written in this place. First and foremost, sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and also, because of the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. So there is a relevancy for us in this House, because legislation written here is having a direct impact on the human rights of people in Northern Ireland today.

Layla Moran: Can the hon. Lady confirm something that Northern Ireland Amnesty told me, which is that, yes, powers are theoretically devolved to Northern Ireland, but there is no piece of human rights legislation that has been passed at Stormont; and actually, all changes to human rights law in Northern Ireland have been passed in this place?

Stella Creasy: I know that the hon. Lady also feels strongly about this issue. If I may, however, I shall now deal with—in particular—the human rights obligations that I believe we have in this place as a direct result of the Good Friday agreement.

There is a theoretical argument about what those pieces of legislation mean, and there is the human impact of what they mean for people in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I will shortly, but I feel that the Committee wants to hear the figures that I am about to give.

A year and a half ago, the House voted to allow women from Northern Ireland to come to England and Wales and have abortions on the NHS. We now know that 28 women a week travel to this country for that very purpose. We also know that our own Supreme Court says that it is a cruel and degrading treatment of our own citizens to require them to travel. Many cannot travel. Many find that journey lonely, frightening and difficult, at the very time when they are at their most vulnerable. We also know that a year ago, 84 couples in Northern Ireland had to have civil partnerships because they could not have the basic equality of recognition before the law of their relationship as a marriage. That is the very human impact of those ancient pieces of legislation that we crafted in this place.

I will now happily give way to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), because I want to hear from her.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. She will be well aware of the Supreme Court ruling in, I think, June this year which established—the majority of the judges made it quite clear—that the existing abortion legislation in Northern Ireland was “deeply unsatisfactory” in relation to fatal foetal abnormality and sexual crime. The law in Northern Ireland will have to change. That was a ruling in the Supreme Court, our highest court in the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady made clear at the beginning of her speech that her new clause would not change the law in Northern Ireland, so if it is passed this evening, or even put to a vote, what exactly will be the consequence?

Stella Creasy: The hon. Lady has raised an important point. That court judgment in June 2018 held us all to account for what we were doing about human rights. It was simply because the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was not a direct victim of that policy that the policy could not be enacted. We learnt today that Sarah Ewart, an incredibly brave woman, is continuing the court process, because there is no other form of redress and remedy at present.

As the Government have previously said, these are matters on which the Assembly, were it to be functioning, should be able to act; but, as we said at the start, the Bill constitutes a recognition that the Assembly is not functioning, and is unlikely to be functioning soon.

What, then—this is the human question—do women like Sarah Ewart do? What, then, do people who love each other do when their politicians fail them? What do the public do? The new clause asks that question in a way that none of us can ignore. It asks the Secretary of State to take on the responsibility of reporting on what she will do.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I will happily give way, but I do want to make some progress, because I know that other Members want to speak.

Stella Creasy: With respect, I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has read the legislation on which we are voting today, because it constitutes a recognition that there will not be an election in Northern Ireland any time soon to make that possible. So I repeat my question to him: what do the women do who need that help now, who deserve that respect and equality when it comes to control over their own bodies, and who might be in that dreadful position that involves a fatal foetal abnormality? What do they do now?

What those women do now is look to this place to be able to assist them. They look to the Secretary of State, and to the piece of legislation that she is creating, and they can look to the new clause to hear the call from this place that we will not ignore them. We will hold ourselves to account, and will hold Secretaries of State to account, for the incompatibility in human rights that the continued existence of those two pieces of legislation represents in their lives. That is what this incredibly reasonable new clause does. It does not create a new law, but it does not shy away from recognising the impact of those existing laws either. In that sense, it is entirely within the spirit of the Good Friday agreement.

Twenty years ago, our predecessors in this House, alongside their colleagues from the Irish Government, swore to uphold the human rights of the Northern Irish
They swore in the Good Friday agreement to make sure that there was an equivalency of rights. Every single month that passes, that promise comes into stark relief because when we look at the Republic where same-sex marriage is legal and look at that historic referendum this year when abortion became legal in the Republic, we can see that that request not to have different rights is becoming tested.

The Good Friday agreement also required this House and UK politicians to act alongside their Irish counterparts, and that is what this new clause can do, while respecting our shared desire to see the Assembly up and running. So it is a very simple amendment, and I am sorry that it has come to this point and the Secretary of State does not feel able to accept it, and I am proud that it has cross-party support, because that respects and recognises that upholding human rights cannot be something we simply talk about doing abroad but do not recognise on our own doorstep.

I also think there has to be some honesty here. There are some Members of this House who do not believe that women anywhere should have bodily autonomy; there are some Members of this House who do not believe we should be able to marry the person we love. But I make a simple plea to those people: “Be honest with the people of Northern Ireland that your objection is that, and do not use devolution as a decoy for a denial of your human rights.”

**Layla Moran:** I say this to be helpful to others in the House. I went to Belfast recently—to Stormont—and I had not appreciated that same-sex marriage has majority support among MLAs and a huge amount of support in terms of public opinion. The reason why it did not pass is because there is a thing called the petition of concern which essentially acts as a veto, so to say that there is not support and the people of Northern Ireland should just change their politicians does not work in this case; it has to be us who take that leap for them.

**Stella Creasy:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Sadly, on both issues opinion polls show us that the politicians in Northern Ireland are behind the public consistently; indeed, they are behind their own supporters when it comes to both issues. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings is chuntering from a sedentary position; I understand that he has philosophical objections on some of the issues in this debate, but I hope he will have respect for the people of Northern Ireland and therefore agree that the case should be heard as to why the Secretary of State should be asked to protect their human rights and to be held to account for what is happening.

**Mr John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) rose—

**Stella Creasy:** I happily give way.

**Mr Hayes:** That means I will not have to chunter from a sedentary position, so I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Just to be clear about public opinion in Northern Ireland, the latest polling, which was authoritative—it was not a rogue poll—shows that the overwhelming majority of Northern Irish women favour the status quo, and interestingly that was broken down by age and younger Northern Irish women are no more in favour of changing to the position the hon. Lady wants than older ladies.

**Stella Creasy:** I am fascinated by the poll the right hon. Gentleman cites. Let me give him the direct data from the Amnesty International poll taken this year, which says that 65% of people in Northern Ireland think abortion should be decriminalised and 66% think Westminster should act in the absence of the Assembly. Let me also cite for him the Sky News poll of 2018 that shows that 76% of people in Northern Ireland support equal marriage. I say to him gently again that I understand that he has philosophical objections on some of these issues, whether from religious or moral conscience, and I respect that, but it is not enough to say this is about devolution on that basis. He needs to be honest with this House that his objection is about conscience, because there is not a devolution objection to this new clause. This new clause respects devolution, but it also asks us to respect human rights.

Ten years ago we had the opportunity to change things for women in Northern Ireland and that did not happen, and as a result we know from studies that 10,000 women have either had to travel to England to have an abortion or have taken pills bought online. If we reject this new clause, are we really trying to say that 10 MPs matter more than those 10,000 women whose lives have in the last 10 years been affected by our failure to act?

**Anna Soubry:** Will the hon. Lady also make it very clear that the rather barbaric and antiquated laws that exist in Northern Ireland are not even effective, because all they mean is that, as she said, about 28 women every week have to come over to England and Wales? So the laws are not working in any event, and this just makes them even more barbaric because women have to travel to exercise the same rights that my constituents have.

**Stella Creasy:** I share the passion of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on this matter and increasingly on many other things. She is absolutely right. Stopping safe, legal abortion does not stop abortions happening; it just stops safe abortions happening, as we have seen from the women taking pills who have been unable to seek help from their doctors in Northern Ireland. Stopping same-sex marriage does not stop people of the same sex falling in love with each other; it just stops them having the equal respect and dignity that comes from being able to marry who they love and say it proudly. It is a simple right that all of us in this Chamber would want and that all of us seek for our constituents.

However, I recognise that those are matters for the Assembly, and that is why I want to remind Members here that this new clause respects that process because it looks at the legislation before us today and asks who, in the absence of a functioning Assembly, can be the champion of the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland. It asks who can address the incompatibilities that these court proceedings are identifying, and who can ensure that we do not spend another 10, 20 or 30 years hearing the stories of shame, of hurt and of the rights abuses of the people of Northern Ireland, and simply shrugging our shoulders because politicians cannot get their act together to have an Assembly.
5.30 pm

The answer is sitting opposite us, in the role of the Secretary of State. If the Secretary of State cannot stand up for the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland in the circumstances, and if she cannot account to us as a House about the impact of legislation written in this place on the lives of the people of Northern Ireland, who can? This is not about the Assembly. It is not about us directly. It is about the Secretary of State, and the new clause would simply ensure that that role cannot be avoided.

The people of Northern Ireland need to hear now that their rights are not going to be the casualty of the chaos that we are seeing right now in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland, who need their rights to be protected, need to know now that they will find friends across this House. We have already seen that in the numbers of people signing the new clause, and I hope, given that it does not set out a new law but recognises accountability and responsibility, that it will find favour across the House. The people of Northern Ireland, whose rights have been such a political football for so long, need and deserve nothing less from all of us.

Fiona Bruce: I rise to speak against new clause 7 on the basis that it is clearly inappropriate. It goes far beyond the Government’s narrow, specific intention, in framing this emergency Bill, of ensuring that the administrative functions should keep working efficiently in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive there. Their intention was not to go further and to influence key devolved policy matters that should be more properly decided by that Executive. The very fact that this is an emergency Bill is a cause of great concern. Many colleagues have said to me that on such important and sensitive issues—

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is very kind of my hon. Friend to give way. On the subject of emergency Bills, what could be more of an emergency than the women of Northern Ireland wondering, right here and right now, what on earth they have to put themselves through in order to have the choice to have an abortion without having to travel to England? For me, that is a pretty big emergency, too.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree that this is an issue that requires the greatest of care and that needs to be addressed with considerable compassion. It therefore deserves more time to be considered by the Members of this House than it has been given in this emergency debate. That is the point that I wanted to make. The proposer of the new clause might say that it does not interfere with devolution, but it clearly has the potential to undermine devolution, touching as it does on the key devolved issues of abortion and marriage.

Jim Shannon: Not only does the new clause go against the will of a great many of us in this House, but it also goes against the will of 60% of the people of Northern Ireland—women who say that they do not want any change. That is what the people of Northern Ireland are saying, so why should this House make it any different?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point, which I shall refer to further.

I think the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said that the powers of guidance that the Bill gives to the Secretary of State are powerful. Indeed, I believe that they are; the guidance given to the Secretary of State is far reaching. The guidance cannot and should not change the law, but it could well encourage officials and citizens to believe that it does, and it may well change behaviour. I therefore exhort the Secretary of State to ensure that if new clause 7 is passed—I will certainly vote against it—none of the guidance she provides in any way encourages officials to effect any policy changes. Indeed, I seek her reassurance today that she will specifically guard against that happening.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend appears to be arguing for the continuation of a human rights border down the Irish sea.

Fiona Bruce: What I am arguing—reluctantly, I need to repeat many of the points I made in the Chamber yesterday—is that this key issue does merit reconsideration, but reconsideration in the right legislative chamber, namely the Northern Ireland Assembly. Elected officials there should be making such decisions while accountable to the people they represent.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. The recent Supreme Court decision requested that lawmakers take action where our law is incompatible with treaties that involve requirements on the UK Parliament. Even if it was just a matter for Northern Ireland, it has been almost two years since democracy has been in action there, so it is surely for this House to take note of such things.

Fiona Bruce: I am happy to address such points. I accept that several justices set out their thoughts on abortion legislation in Northern Ireland in a narrow set of circumstances in the Supreme Court decision earlier this year. However, those views cannot be extrapolated into a case for arguing that human rights are being curtailed in every circumstance in Northern Ireland. We must be clear that the Supreme Court did not make a binding declaration of the incompatibility of Northern Ireland abortion law with human rights. New clause 7 should not use that declaration to justify this proposal.

Diana Johnson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fiona Bruce: No. I have taken several interventions, and I will, if I may, proceed.

New clause 7 goes much further even than the non-binding comments made by the judges in the Supreme Court case—a case of serious foetal abnormality. As I say, I am mindful of what a difficult situation that is and fully agree that it merits further attention for the women who may be affected by it, but that must happen in the right legislative chamber.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Bruce: No, I will continue, if I may.

New clause 7, which refers to the decriminalisation of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, goes much further than even the obiter dicta
statements of the Supreme Court judges. It goes much further than referring just to foetal abnormality and seeks much broader changes than the narrow circumstances to which the judges referred, which is a further reason why it should be opposed.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Bruce: I have said no, and I am going to continue. I have taken many interventions, and many others want to speak.

Even in situations where there is a declaration of incompatibility, the Human Rights Act 1998 is clear that legislatures are not required to change the law. That is for legislators to decide, and in this case that means the Northern Ireland Executive. It has also been argued that the Government should change the law because of wider international human rights obligations that the UK has signed up to—specifically recommendations from a February 2018 report by a UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women—CEDAW. Professor Mark Hill QC has written a long opinion on the CEDAW report, and he argues cogently that there is no requirement to act on the basis of the report because there is no right to abortion under the relevant convention and because the committee does not have the power to stipulate that the UK should make any resolutions.

Members are being asked to support new clause 7 on the basis of pressing human rights concerns, but those concerns rest principally on a failure properly to understand what a declaration of incompatibility means. Such a declaration carries no imperative to change the law, especially when the subject is within the margin of appreciation, as is the case with abortion.

Baroness Hale acknowledged at paragraph 39 of the Supreme Court’s Northern Ireland abortion law judgment in June that the democratically expressed will of the people is important, and we must not forget the key vote by the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016 not to change abortion law.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) mentioned some statistics, and so did the hon. Member for Walsingham. I remind the Committee of a ComRes poll released just last week showing that the following percentages of people say that changes to abortion law should be a decision for the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives, not Westminster: 64% of Northern Irish people, 66% of Northern Irish women and 70% of 18 to 34-year-olds in Northern Ireland. We must respect that, we must respect the Assembly’s 2016 decision and we must respect that many people in Northern Ireland do not want to see these changes, and they certainly do not want to see changes resulting from guidelines issued by a Secretary of State in Westminster, with all the implications that could involve.

New clause 7 must be rejected. I absolutely understand that this is a very sensitive topic but, even through a misapprehension or a misunderstanding, for civil servants to be seen as being given the power to influence this policy would be quite wrong. Out of respect for the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives, new clause 7 must be voted down.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate in Committee. Amendment 15, in the name of the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), would require an election to be held when these special measures come to an end. For our part, the Democratic Unionist party has no fear of an election. We have just had a council by-election in Carrickfergus, which we won comfortably. We are not fearful of putting ourselves before the people.

If the hon. Gentleman were here, I would say that holding an election would not change the reality. If we have dialogue and cannot reach a political agreement, all an election will do is further polarise the community and make it even more difficult to reach a political agreement. [Interruption.] If Labour Members are so interested in elections in Northern Ireland, maybe one of them will explain why the Labour party does not contest elections there.

Labour Members want to change laws in Northern Ireland, and they want to tell the people of Northern Ireland what to do, but they do not have the courage of their convictions to put themselves before the people of Northern Ireland and seek election. A little quiet from that quarter is the order of the day. When they are ready to come before the people of Northern Ireland and put themselves forward, we will listen to the Labour party. With all due respect, at least the Conservative party—

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): On a point of order, Dame Rosie. I would be grateful for a more comradely debate, rather than the rant to which we are being subjected. Perhaps we need to take a moment to calm down.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I remind everybody that moderation in language and in debate is what we would like to see. This is a very important debate, and perhaps we need to take the temperature down a little.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: If we need to moderate debate because I have called on people to put themselves forward and seek a democratic mandate, I stand to be corrected, but the people of my constituency are looking at the Labour party. More than 60% of the people who voted in my constituency voted for my party at the general election. When I hear Labour Members tell me that they speak more for the people I represent than I do, I am entitled to say that they should put themselves forward and seek a democratic mandate, I stand to be corrected, but the people of my constituency are looking at the Labour party. More than 60% of the people who voted in my constituency voted for my party at the general election. When I hear Labour Members tell me that they speak more for the people I represent than I do, I am entitled to say that they should put themselves forward in Lagan Valley at the next election. Seek a mandate. Take me on. I am more than happy to contest the Labour party in Lagan Valley. Let us see then whether I speak for the people of Lagan Valley or they do.

5.45 pm

I really believe that having an election for the sake of it does not get us beyond the current political impasse. Again, for the record, let me say that the DUP stands ready to engage in dialogue and to go into government. We are not preventing the people of Northern Ireland from being in government. We have an electoral mandate to be in government, but Sinn Féin—one party; itself alone—is preventing the people of Northern Ireland and my party from exercising the right given to us by the people to provide government for the people of Northern Ireland.
I say to the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) that I am supportive of his amendment calling for the Secretary of State to have regard to representations from Members of Parliament, because that is not an unreasonable suggestion. Members of Parliament, not just on our Benches, but even those who do not take their seats, should have the opportunity to provide input and advice to the Government on this. I am bound to say, however, that that is not a substitute for what we would have liked to have seen: in the absence of a fully functioning Assembly, at the very least we would have liked its Members to have been given a scrutiny function. In the exercise of those powers, those Members could, thus, scrutinise the Government Departments that are to be the subject and beneficiary of this legislation. It is a matter of regret that the Government have resisted such a proposition because Sinn Féin is unlikely to take part. Yet again, Members of the Legislative Assembly will not have the opportunity to be involved and have a role in this process because one party, alone, declines to take part. When people talk about vetoes, we can talk about the petition of concern, but Sinn Féin does not need to exercise a petition of concern to refuse to take part in the function of government in Northern Ireland; it simply consults its illegal army council, gets instructions from Connolly House and refuses to be in government. That is the situation we are in at the moment, and it is a pretty dreadful one.

Let me turn to new clause 7, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). She says she respects the principle of devolution, yet some of the Members supporting the new clause have put forward Bills in this House of Commons that would have the effect of undermining devolution in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I take with some concern this notion that what is proposed is not about interfering with the devolution settlement, as I fear it does.

I also wish to deal with the suggestion that is integral to the new clause, which is that the reason we need to make this amendment to the Bill is the ruling of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court did not rule that the law should change in Northern Ireland—that is absolutely the case. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is much more learned in the law than I am, but I have to say to her that I have consulted the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and he tells me clearly, in writing, that the Supreme Court judgment does not oblige the Northern Ireland Assembly to change the law.

Lady Hermon: The right hon. Gentleman is referring to a judgment where the majority of the Supreme Court, by four to three, dismissed the case on a technical point to do with the status and powers of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. If he reads the judgment carefully, he will find—I will stand corrected if I am not right on this—that a majority of the judges, including Lord Kerr, described the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland in relation to fatal foetal abnormality and sexual crime as “deeply unsatisfactory”. Those are the words that were used. I plead with the right hon. Gentleman’s party to indicate what help and assistance is going to be given to those hundreds of women who feel that they have to leave their own country, Northern Ireland, to seek an abortion. Abortion is not compulsory; it is an option. Women should have the choice in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormality. Will the hon. Gentleman’s party accept those circumstances for change?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I respect what the hon. Lady said, but I point out to her that section 4(6) of the Human Rights Act 1998 is clear on the point of incompatibility. It states clearly: “A declaration under this section (“a declaration of incompatibility”)…does not affect the validity, continuing operation or enforcement of the provision in respect of which it is given”. That is the human rights law of this country. When the hon. Lady suggested in her intervention earlier that the Supreme Court judgment compelled the Northern Ireland Assembly to change the law, she was incorrect in her assertion. That opinion comes from the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and his respected advice on this subject.

On the question that the hon. Lady posed, in respect of fatal foetal abnormality, when a mother is expecting a child with a potentially life-limiting condition, I too have met Sarah Ewart, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who is her Member of Parliament, and I have enormous respect for Sarah. As a result of her initiative, the Northern Ireland Executive commissioned a working group to examine this area of the law in Northern Ireland, and that working group brought forward proposals. Here is the irony: if Sinn Féin allowed Northern Ireland to have a Government, we would by now have addressed this area of the law.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Because we have a working group that was set up by the Executive and that has brought forward proposals, this area of the law would have been addressed by now.

Layla Moran: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: With respect to the hon. Member for North Down, the party that is preventing this issue from being addressed in Northern Ireland is not the Democratic Unionist party; it is Sinn Féin who are preventing the Executive from addressing the report of the working group, which has brought forward proposals in respect of mothers who are expectant with a child who may have a life-limiting condition, so let us get our facts straight.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: In respect of the issue relating to sex crime, I agree with the hon. Member for North Down that we need to examine this area of the law in Northern Ireland, but the difficulty is that we cannot do it—not because the Democratic Unionist party is standing in the way of examining those sensitive issues, but because Sinn Féin are preventing the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive from carrying out their function. That is the political reality of the situation in Northern Ireland.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: That is why we are unable to examine the laws.

Layla Moran: Give way!

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: In respect of the proposals before us, it is important that we consider carefully what we are doing. If we really are to be true to our commitment to respect the devolution principle—

Layla Moran: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) referred earlier to a border in the Irish sea. Let me address that for a moment.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: What is the point of devolution?

Layla Moran: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It was this House that decided that Northern Ireland should have devolved responsibility for abortion and marriage. It was this House that decided to give to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive the power to legislate on these areas of life. That is the reality. The hon. Member for Walthamstow talked about the decisions of this House—

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It was this House that decided that the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive had the power to legislate on these areas of the law.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Layla Moran: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: In respect of—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman is going to give way, so rather than just shouting at him, I think that we should allow him to continue, because he will be well aware that a lot of other hon. Members want to contribute to the debate.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I am very much aware of that, Dame Rosie. I have taken some interventions but there is a lot that we need to say and a lot that others want to say, and I respect that.

This issue is important because it is about the principle of devolution. If we truly respect the decisions of this House—which gave the power to the Northern Ireland people, through the Assembly and the Executive, to exercise the right to legislate on these areas of the law—please let us not talk about creating a border in the Irish sea, when we all voted to give Northern Ireland that power. Otherwise, what is the point of devolution? The point of devolution is that the people of Northern Ireland have the right to legislate for laws that affect their lives. It is the same in Scotland and in Wales. That is why we have devolution.

Members of this House say to me, a Member from Northern Ireland, that talking about having different laws in my part of the United Kingdom is somehow about creating a border in the Irish sea; it is not. It is about respecting the principle on which this House agreed—that Northern Ireland has the right to make its own laws in its own legislature as part of this United Kingdom. That is important.

We must respect the devolution principle, not breach it. I understand that this legislation is only about giving civil servants advice and direction; I am not suggesting that it is about changing the law. Nevertheless, we need to be careful because I rather suspect that the hon. Member for Walthamstow does not see this as the end game—not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Let us be honest with each other about that. I believe that the hon. Lady sees this measure as a means to an end in changing the law in Northern Ireland. All I am saying—I echo previous comments made today—is that most people in my constituency and in Northern Ireland believe that it is for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to make those laws. My party will therefore vote against new clause 7 because it has the potential to undermine the principle of devolution. I say that without prejudice to the points made by the hon. Member for North Down, which I respect. We are not running away from the issues, court judgments or any of those things. What we are saying is that the proper place to deal with and discuss these matters is in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In the most recent democratic vote on abortion law of any legislature in the United Kingdom, the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016—only two years ago—voted by a majority to retain the existing law on abortion in Northern Ireland. Now, I accept that we need to examine the issues. In fact, we have looked at the whole question of life-limiting conditions and we have a working group report that we want to get back to.

Let me return to the core and central point of all this: I listened to the new president of Sinn Féin, Mary Lou McDonald, talking about equal rights, and I pointed out to her in a panel discussion that if the Assembly sat tomorrow and there was a vote on marriage, the Democratic Unionist party would not have enough seats on its own to table a petition of concern. I therefore challenged Sinn Féin that if it believed that this issue is such a pressing one, it should call the Assembly and get the Government up and running. If it believes that this is the priority—if Sinn Féin thinks that health, education, roads and housing should be secondary—it can list it as the first item of business. But it will not call the Assembly and it will not form an Executive. Sinn Féin will not give the people of Northern Ireland, through their elected representatives, the opportunity to address any of these issues.

That is the reality we are dealing with. We can trade arguments back and forward with each other on some of these very sensitive issues, but the reality is that my constituents do not have a Government this evening and are not getting decisions taken that need to be taken because one political party in Northern Ireland is denying not only equal rights but basic rights that impact on the daily lives of my constituents, whether it is their housing rights, their health rights or their education rights. All those rights—human rights—are being impacted. It would be good to hear some hon. Members refer to
those human rights that are currently being denied by Sinn Féin, which refuses Northern Ireland the right to have a democratic Government.

6 pm  
Dr Murrison: Rarely do we get such fine, sweeping oratory in a Bill Committee. That is probably one of the few advantages of fast-tracking legislation. I am afraid that I am going to turn the temperature down a couple of notches in speaking to my amendments 1 to 9, which are all far more prosaic than new clause 7. I will certainly not be able to match in any way, shape or form the oratory we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). These are nevertheless, I believe, important amendments to an important Bill. They deal with clauses 2, 3 and 4.

My amendment 1 is, as it were, amendment 20 in the name of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd)—that is, it does not delete clause 2 but simply, modestly removes a subsection. That subsection deals with the expediency of not seeking the House’s approval to extend the provisions we are discussing in terms of the Executive. I tabled the amendment to explore with the Secretary of State what “expediency” might mean, because we are handing to her a range of quite important powers in unusual circumstances. That suggests to me that the Committee really needs to do its utmost to scrutinise what is going on. It does not seem to me that the word “expediency” should really creep into the lexicography at all. My point in tabling this simple and modest amendment is to probe the Secretary of State on the circumstances in which she would see fit to enact this extension without the prior approval of the House.

Amendment 2 is the guts of what I want to discuss. It really cuts to the chase in terms of the Bill, because it deals with guidance, which is the single most important part of the proposals before us. It seeks, for example, to be more prescriptive in the sort of guidance that I would like the Secretary of State to give to the Northern Ireland civil service. We discussed some of this on Second Reading. I believe that that would be an improvement, having gone through the draft guidance that has been published, of which, presumably, all right hon. and hon. Members who are interested in this matter have got copies from the Library. The amendment goes further and makes it more prescriptive.

The flagship issue is Hart. There is cross-party and cross-community support for the Hart report, and there really can be no excuse for not cracking on and doing this now. I very much hope that in the forthcoming guidance the Secretary of State will enable that process to be advanced. I have cited Hart as No. 1 in my list of things I seek her to be specific on, because it is obviously the No. 1, big ticket issue that people would like to see action on. People out there really cannot understand why action has not been taken.

Sir Mike Penning: I do not understand why Hart has not been done. There was huge courage within the Northern Ireland Health Department when we got medical cannabis for constituents in Northern Ireland when we were getting Billies and Alfies over here. People had the will and they needed the confidence. Is my hon. Friend sure that this legislation will give them the confidence, because clearly they are frightened and something is holding them back? They have done it for medical cannabis, so surely they could do it for Hart.

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, which elegantly exemplifies what I am going on about and brings me neatly on to—

Owen Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Murrison: Before I move neatly on, I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Owen Smith: I have signed the hon. Gentleman’s excellent amendment, but does he not understand from the legislation and, indeed, the answer we heard from the Secretary of State earlier that, in her view, this does not allow her to enact any of the recommendations made under the Hart review? Is he not deeply disappointed by that?

Dr Murrison: I am not really sure that that is the case. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the guidance, which I am sure he has now read. On the third page, the guidance states that particular weight must be given to any “serious detriment to the public interest, public health and wellbeing”. That seems fairly clearcut to me. I think that the Secretary of State will have got the sense of the House today on her being proactive in the guidance that she is able to issue.

Emma Little Pengelly: Some of the concern is that this is actually not that straightforward. The terms of reference that set up the Hart inquiry clearly said that what came after the findings was not a matter for the chair of the inquiry. There are issues and decision points in those recommendations. To use a quick example, Hart recommends legal aid or separate legal representation for each of the people coming forward to a redress board. That has never been agreed. There would be a huge cost and, in my view, a lot of bureaucracy with that approach. There are decision points in the recommendations that, as I understand it in terms of the guidance, could not be made by a civil servant, because there is no consensus at this stage on those matters. That is the complication, and that is why the Secretary of State needs to step in and make those decisions.

Dr Murrison: I do understand that. One point I made on Second Reading was that I was slightly disappointed that the Bill does not advance pretty much any of the recommendations we made in our report on the democratic deficit, published in May. Had it done so, there would be scope now for even more consultation, using formal structures, which may have assisted the implementation to which the hon. Lady rightly refers.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) mentioned cannabis, which leads me on to healthcare—a matter that is of particular importance to my Committee right now, since we were at the Royal Victoria Hospital on Monday, where we took evidence from a number of service users. It is very clear from the guidance, which cites public interest and public health, that this matter is preying on the mind of Ministers.
It is a crying shame that there is no proper cancer strategy in Northern Ireland right now. There is one published in 2008, so it is out of date. We have a situation where, to pick one condition at random, the outcomes for prostate cancer are far worse in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the country. This is pretty clear. If we do not have a cancer strategy and we believe that a cancer strategy will be of assistance in improving outcomes, of course outcomes will be worse if one is not in place. To get a cancer strategy, we need some form of direction to civil servants to get on with it and, furthermore, to implement it.

Jim Shannon: One thing we have discussed in the Select Committee is the scourge of diabetes. In Northern Ireland, we have the largest percentage of people with diabetes per head of population in the UK. We also have the largest proportion of type 1 child diabetics in the whole United Kingdom, with Scotland coming second. We need a strategy in place for that. We had a strategy before, which covered all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we cannot do that today because we do not have the wherewithal. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we really need to see some action in the Health Department, to address all chronic diseases, including diabetes and cancer?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not want to labour the point, but I feel the need to briefly mention the fact that screening for cancer in Northern Ireland is frankly woeful—it is way behind. We cannot have a situation where there is faecal immunochemical testing in the rest of the UK, but it is denied to people in Northern Ireland, and they also cannot get HPV screening for cervical cancer. That is just not acceptable. But for these things to happen, we need some form of direction, however it comes, and that is a matter for Ministers and those who draft measures of the sort we are discussing and, of course, those who deal with the consequentials of the guidance that we are dealing with.

Owen Smith: I make no apology for going back to the Hart inquiry, because there are hundreds of victims of historical sexual abuse in Northern Ireland who will be watching this debate and wondering whether action is likely to be taken by the Government as a result of this legislation. I think that we are still very unclear whether the Secretary of State interprets this legislation, as the hon. Gentleman and I do, as giving leeway to civil servants in Northern Ireland to undertake further action. Through him, may I urge the Secretary of State to intervene at some point before the close of the Committee this evening and clarify whether this will allow action on Hart?

Dr Murrison: The purpose of amendments tends to be to elicit such answers from Ministers, and it will be very interesting to hear from the Secretary of State how she would like to play this, because I am hoping that we will have some encouragement in that respect. Hon. Members have certainly given her every encouragement. I have been struck by how much encouragement to be proactive in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland there has been during this debate. I think that the Committee understands full well that a great deal needs to be done, and it needs to be done fairly quickly on a number of important public policy issues, of which Hart is just one.

The guidance makes a great deal of the public finances and the economy in Northern Ireland. Goodness me, we could debate all day the economy in Northern Ireland and where that needs to go. One thing we have been particularly struck by as a Select Committee is of course farming and growing in Northern Ireland: horticulture is far more important there than in the rest of the United Kingdom. One of the recommendations we are very keen on is that there should be a proper farming strategy in Northern Ireland very soon. At the moment, it is having to compete with the Republic, where, if I am honest, the Government in Dublin have been really quite proactive and have placed farmers and growers north of the border at something of a competitive disadvantage, with or without Brexit.

Things need to be done, and fairly urgently, to improve productivity in Northern Ireland, while recognising the unusual nature of farming in Northern Ireland and recognising that farming in Northern Ireland is not the same as farming in the rest of the United Kingdom. In the main, we are not talking about East Anglian barley barons in Northern Ireland, but about small family farms. That is why the guidance, which I hope will preoccupy the Secretary of State in the weeks and months ahead, should produce a firm statement about what the civil service of Northern Ireland needs to do in relation to producing such a farming strategy. If we have no restoration of the Executive by the end of the year, we should certainly give some attention to that directly.

I will skip the rest of my amendments because they are simply to do with ensuring that there is added scrutiny of these measures and the guidance that flows from them, as well as with the appointment function to be exercised by this House, as cited in clause 4, and in particular—if I may make this suggestion—by my Committee.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I would not of course challenge the Chair on the grouping of these amendments—that would be poor—but I would gently say that two hours for the range of amendments before us on a great many subjects is not sufficient. This is not satisfactory, and I hope that the Government will learn that we have a deep interest in the issues across Northern Ireland and will give us more time.

I have worked with the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on a number of health issues in England and Wales, and the points he raised in his amendments about health inequalities across Northern Ireland were well made. I particularly want to highlight amendment 22, especially in relation to pensions, in the name of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). Such a measure is in the gift of the Secretary of State, and we certainly wish to see it progressed.

Most of my comments are going to be about new clause 7, and I will start with same-sex marriage. I was proud to be a co-sponsor of the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and I was a witness to his illness last March, which was one of the best I have heard in this Chamber. I should say that, although I am pleased to be married, he beautifully encapsulated the equality point when he
told us the heartfelt response made by one of the people he was speaking to in south Armagh. The man said that, frankly, gay people had the right “to be as miserable as the rest of us.”

With respect to the fact that people who love each other cannot build a happy life together as a married couple in Northern Ireland, he asked in that speech:

“Does anyone think that is fair? Does anyone think that is right? Does anyone think that can continue?”—[Official Report, 28 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 791-792.]

6.15 pm

The will of this House was clear from our support. I am delighted that his endeavours were recognised this month: in the PinkNews awards, he was politician of the year, along with his friend Lord Hayward, who I am glad to see has joined us in the Gallery. That was much deserved; they were both very pretty in pink that night. They are not going to give up, and we on the Labour Benches are right with them.

Turning to women’s reproductive rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has already changed the Government’s position with regard to facilitating women in Northern Ireland’s access to abortion services in England and Wales. Civil servants are not informing women of their rights to those services, and are leaving it up to non-governmental organisations to tell women how to access that provision, which is still available to them. Not doing something is a political act and has consequences, and that needs to be recognised in the provisions of the Bill going through the House tonight. As an elected Member of this House who supported a measure in good faith, I find it unacceptable that civil servants in Belfast do not pass on that information because there was no law change in Northern Ireland, and that somehow that is considered acceptable.

Anna Soubry: When we went to Northern Ireland with Amnesty International, we learned that people cannot be given that information, because giving it is a criminal offence for which a person will be prosecuted, and they will face a lengthy prison sentence. One of the most concerning features of all this is the inability of people to get any form of advice.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that intervention. The right hon. Lady is of course right: the issue of advice, guidance and information is subject to some discussion, and that is not helpful in this situation.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) tested the will of the House on this issue after giving a superb and measured speech on a Bill seeking to decriminalise women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was an attempt to divide women by suggesting we could not decriminalise in England and Wales because giving it is a criminal offence for which a person will be prosecuted, and they will face a lengthy prison sentence. That is not helpful in this situation.

Women’s reproductive rights are at the core of that internationalism and solidarity. It seems that the Government share our view. This year, they launched a good flagship programme—I commend some of that work—from the Department for International Development called Work and Opportunities for Women. The objective is to improve economic opportunities for women through business intervention in supply chains and economic development programmes. It is, after all, a Conservative programme, so its focus is interesting. It is about women’s economic empowerment. That Government policy states that women’s economic opportunities will be improved by, among other things, influencing the UK and global agenda on women’s economic empowerment.

The Government’s supporting literature says:

“Sexual and reproductive health and rights...including the right to decide if and how many children to have, the right to live free from disease and the right to access confidential, high-quality health services which enable women to control their own bodies...are fundamental to women’s economic empowerment.”

It goes on to say that the link between sexual and reproductive health and rights and women’s economic empowerment “is reflected in DFID’s Economic Development Strategy...2017...which includes a commitment to increase access to family planning as a vehicle for transforming women’s economic opportunities.”

Those are the Government’s own policies. It goes on to say that the Government support initiatives in this area in the DFID priority countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Palestine, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, South Africa, South Sudan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Uganda, Yemen, Zimbabwe and Zambia—28 countries. What rank hypocrisy by the UK Government in committing to increase access to family planning across the world but not in our own precious Union for our own people.

I am in no doubt that change is coming. The issue at heart is how much more suffering the Government are willing to inflict on women from Northern Ireland before it is achieved.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend has brilliantly exposed the hypocrisy of our country on the international stage. She talks about the impetus for change in these islands. Is it not a complete absurdity—and would not much of the objection to new clause 7 this afternoon be laughable if it were not so serious—that Northern Ireland, especially following the referendum in the Republic of Ireland, will be the only place in Great Britain and Northern Ireland or on the island of Ireland where same-sex couples will not be allowed to get married and women will not be able to seek access to safe and legal abortion? It is time to end that anomaly.

Karin Smyth: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Today, we have seen Sarah Ewart bravely take on the role of doing something about it.

The Government may kick the can down the road with the Bill, but nothing is standing still. As my hon. Friend said, the changing of its law by the Republic of Ireland will mean that, up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, women can take a train, make a short bus ride or even walk to a service. Yesterday’s vote in this place is important.
I have listened carefully to the speeches today, including from the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). I spent a day in Stormont recently as part of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, taking evidence from all sides in the debate, and meeting the Attorney General, the director of medical services and other campaigners. Feelings on this issue are strong. We need to treat the issue with care and establish services respectfully. But we have experience of that. People in Northern Ireland have had and still have to manage much greater challenges. The new clause is helpful and respectful and would allow a process to take place. The Government would be well advised to respond as respectfully and to listen to the women who would rather be at home.

Karen Bradley: Before I speak to Government amendments 23 and 24, it is worth taking a moment to remind right hon. and hon. Members of the purpose of the Bill and why we are here today. Many were unable to be here for Second Reading, so I repeat that this is not a Bill that I wanted to introduce. I am doing so because we have to enable public services to continue to be delivered in Northern Ireland. We all want to see politicians in Northern Ireland come together, do the right thing and go back to Stormont to form an Executive. If an Executive were in place, so much that we have debated today would be a matter for its members to discuss and to take the decisions on behalf of the people who elected them. That is what is right for the people of Northern Ireland who have suffered for too long without a Government in Stormont. The time has come for their politicians to do the right thing.

I also repeat my earlier point that the Bill is limited. It will allow decisions to be taken by civil servants who have felt unable to do so since the Buick appeal was heard. We need to make sure that those civil servants can take those decisions, but this is not about their making major policy decisions or becoming lawmakers. This is about civil servants being able to deliver on key infrastructure decisions and other matters relating to the running of public services in Northern Ireland.

I do not want to make life any more difficult than it already is for our dedicated civil servants in the NICS, and being put in a position where they would have to take major policy decisions is something that no civil servant would want. They are incredibly dedicated and they work incredibly hard on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

We also need to make sure that there is no reason at all for the politicians in Northern Ireland not to come together, do the right thing and form a Government. I have been heartened by the words I have heard from the Members of the Democratic Unionist party about their determination to see an Executive reformed as soon as possible. I want to work with all the parties and with no impediments in place, which is why the Bill allows the reformation of an Executive without further legislation, to see that happen as soon as possible so that we can deal with these matters and to do so in the right place, in Stormont, where they can be dealt with by the politicians elected in Northern Ireland.

I remind hon. and right hon. Members that this is a time-limited Bill. It is not a permanent Bill and it does not change anything permanently. It allows a short period in which impediments to forming an Executive are removed, in which the framework and conditions for the politicians to come together are put in the best place they can be, and in which decisions about running public services can continue to be made by civil servants in the way that is right for the people of Northern Ireland without their making major policy decisions, because we need the politicians to do that. In considering these amendments, it is important that we all remember the purpose of the Bill—why we are introducing it, why we are doing so in an emergency situation and not through the normal parliamentary procedures, and what the Government’s intention is.

Let me go back to the Government amendments. I appreciate the hard work of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in scrutinising the Bill so quickly, and I thank it for its report. I am grateful that the Committee acknowledges the potential need for regulations to be made as a matter of urgency in a way that is not possible through the draft affirmative procedure alone. Although my preferred option was to use the negative procedure to enable any such urgent cases to be addressed, I have taken on board the wider concerns expressed by the Committee and accept its recommendation. Amendment 23 therefore provides a short addition to the table in clause 4 to use the negative procedure. That will mean the draft affirmative procedure, unless the case requires urgent action in which case the made affirmative procedure will be used. I think that this strikes the right balance between scrutiny and the capacity to expedite regulations should it be necessary to do so. Amendment 24 is consequential on amendment 23 and removes a cross-reference that is no longer needed now that regulations under clause 4 are subject to the affirmative procedure.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I recognise that intervening on a Secretary of State is quite an attractive prospect for many Back Benchers and that as a result there may not be time for me to catch your eye, Dume Rosie, to speak in support of new clauses 4, 5 and 6, which are tabled in my name. Will the Secretary of State therefore be willing to instruct her junior Minister to meet me to discuss the concerns of the Co-operative movement in Northern Ireland? I hope still to get in a brief word or two about those concerns, but if I do not I would like the opportunity to amplify them with the Minister in private.

Karen Bradley: I certainly intend to ensure that there is time for the hon. Gentleman to speak in support of his new clauses, but of course I think it would be a good idea for me or my Minister of State to meet him and representatives of the Co-operative movement. In the Northern Ireland Office, we make a point of meeting all stakeholders and organisations with concerns. I know how difficult it is for civic society and organisations to know where to turn at this time without Ministers in Stormont, and I meet many organisations regularly that feel frustrated that they do not have Ministers to whom they can turn, so of course we are happy to meet. I remind the hon. Gentleman, as I end up reminding many, many organisations, that most of the things that are raised with us are devolved matters, and that we do not have Executive powers. That point was made very clear in the Hughes judgment earlier this year, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows.
6.30 pm

Owen Smith: Is the Minister saying clearly that she is not anticipating or encouraging civil servants, under the guidance that we are passing here today, to act either to implement the Hart inquiry recommendations or to institute a pension for victims of the troubles?

Karen Bradley: I will come to the specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised, because they are the subject of amendments that have been tabled and I will try to address all those points, but I want to make myself clear. The hon. Gentleman may have missed my comments when I responded to an intervention from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). The head of the Northern Ireland civil service has made it clear that he would like to consult on the Hart recommendations and do the work that would be required in any event, with or without Ministers, to prepare for what implementation of those recommendations and other matters might involve, and I have written to thank him for that decision.

Forgive me; what was the second point that the hon. Gentleman raised?

Owen Smith: Victims’ pensions.

Karen Bradley: I will talk about that specifically, because obviously, although it is another devolved matter, we have spoken to the Victims’ Commissioner about trying to ensure that some progress can be made. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I meet victims of the troubles, I meet victims of sexual abuse, I meet victims of all manner of things, and I meet campaigners for LGBT rights and all sorts of others, and I well understand the desire to get on and take action in this place. However, I very gently say to him—he will know this from his great experience as an adviser, particularly during the period of direct rule—that there is no direct rule-lite. There is no “just intervene a little bit here and a little bit there.” All of that is direct rule, and I do not want to be in direct rule because it is wrong for the people of Northern Ireland. While there is a chance of the parties coming together and doing the right thing in Stormont, that is the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland and I have to give them every opportunity to do that.

Tony Lloyd: May I press the Minister on the question of the victims of terrorism? There is a very strong interpretation that, as a legacy issue, that is the responsibility of the Secretary of State, not of the Stormont Assembly. I think she needs to make it absolutely clear why she will not follow that path, because that would be the quickest way, it would be legal, and it would do something for victims here and now, not in the indefinite future.

Karen Bradley: I appreciate that there is confusion around this matter. I asked for advice very early on in regard to what was reserved, what was devolved, and what had become a matter for this House as a result of the agreement of politicians in Northern Ireland. Let me be clear: many of the interventions that the Government have taken over the years have been as a result of the wishes and the agreement of the parties in Northern Ireland to ask Westminster to take action in certain areas, but victims’ pensions is still a devolved matter. I want to see action in that area, and that is why I have spoken to the Victims’ Commissioner.

Sir Mike Penning: One of the powers of this House and the Government relates to those who are becoming victims—the veterans. If an amendment were tabled in the other place that actually protected our veterans for their service, would the Government oppose that?

Karen Bradley: I know how passionately my right hon. Friend feels about this; and may I tell him that I feel passionately about it too? I want to see justice for our veterans. The veterans and the RUC who served in Northern Ireland were responsible for the fact that the peace process was able to start; it was because of their determination and bravery. I want to make sure that they are treated with the dignity that they should be afforded. I would like to work with my right hon. Friend to ensure that we can deliver that dignity in an appropriate way, but I have to caution him that, as I said earlier, this is a narrow Bill; it is a Bill to enable public services to continue to be run in Northern Ireland because that is necessary for the people of Northern Ireland. I do not think it is the correct vehicle for the kind of action that I know my right hon. Friend wants to see, and on which I want to work with him.

Let me now deal with the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). I am sympathetic to the spirit of amendment 15, but it has technical flaws, and I therefore cannot accept it. First, it would remove an election duty by omitting the original provision that was agreed to in the St Andrews agreement and is part of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Secondly, I think that the period of seven days is impractical. It could fall within a parliamentary recess, and I do not think that an Order in Council during a recess is exactly what the House would want to see.

Thirdly, the amendment does not allow for flexibility. We do not know what point we will reach. I want the politicians to come together and do the right thing as soon as possible, but I must ensure that there is the necessary flexibility to allow for a final short burst of talks if that is what is needed. I understand exactly why my hon. Friend tabled his amendment, but I think that imposing that degree of inflexibility on me, as Secretary of State, would not help the process of getting the Executive up and running again.

The UK Government respect the principle that Parliament should be able to scrutinise certain public appointments before they are made, especially significant appointments to organisations that hold the Government to account, but I do not think that the consequences of amendment 16 would follow the standard process for either United Kingdom or Northern Ireland appointments. The appointments listed in the Bill would not be subject to pre-appointment scrutiny in the Assembly or the Executive, and I think it would be inappropriate to introduce here a degree of pre-appointment scrutiny that does not exist at Stormont, and would not exist in Northern Ireland if Ministers were in place.

New clause 7 has been the subject of much debate. My respect for the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and her campaigning on this matter is immense: I know how hard she campaigns and how much she cares about it. Her hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is another doughty campaigner. I have put on the record, and I continue to believe, that change is needed in Northern Ireland in this regard, and that I support such change. However,
I do not think that it should be made through the Bill or the new clause. The point of the Bill is to allow politicians to come together and form an Executive in Northern Ireland. That is where these decisions should be made.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The academic Paul Jennings, of Queen Mary University of London, has said that the new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is "scrupulous in avoiding issues of devolution and changing the Stormont Westminster relationship. It relates only to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a Westminster actor, and compels the office to issue guidance on the issues of abortion and equal marriage to senior officials in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it refrains from interfering with the mandate of ministers in Northern Ireland."

Karen Bradley: I understand all the points that the hon. Gentleman has made, but the new clause is flawed. It is flawed because the Bill does not allow the law to be changed. It does not make civil servants lawmakers. It asks them to work within the confines of the law as it exists today. We do not want to be in a position in which civil servants are changing the law. I am not, as Secretary of State, changing the law through her guidance? The notes are very clear: it is all about conscience and we on this side of the House will not be changing the law or indeed give anybody the power to change the law. The notes are very clear: it is all about accountability to the Secretary of State so that she can look at human rights and make sure the guidance is there. It does not change the law; it is about guidance and accountability on human rights, and it is a matter of conscience.

Karen Bradley: I am reliably informed that this is a matter of conscience from the point of view of the party Whip on the Government side of the House. I know this is frustrating for my right hon. Friend. And I am not saying this with any pleasure, but am merely stating the facts: the amendment as drafted would not see a change in the law in Northern Ireland. This is a matter that needs to be legislated for in Northern Ireland, and therefore it would not change the situation in Northern Ireland. I add that this is a temporary measure; we need to get an Executive in Stormont, which is what this Bill seeks to achieve, so that they can make the decisions.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am rather encouraged by the line my right hon. Friend is taking on this, because it is about guiding principles, and I have here outcome 12 of the guiding principles for Northern Ireland Departments:

“We give our children and young people the best start in life.”

Will my right hon. Friend bear that in mind, because she is completely right: it is not for civil servants to change the policy? She is completely right on that, and I am very glad to have the assurance she has given, but the best start in life is the key question.

Karen Bradley: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s comments. I well understand that there is great strength of feeling in all parts of the House on this matter. I have considerable sympathy with much of what the hon. Members for Walthamstow and for St Helens North are trying to achieve, but I do not believe that this amendment achieves it, and I believe that the right thing to do is pass this Bill so we can get an Executive back and they can make the decisions in Northern Ireland for the people in Northern Ireland.

I am conscious of time and other Members wish to speak, but I want briefly to touch on a few other points, particularly those made by the Chair of the Select Committee. I know that in amendment I my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) is concerned about the need for an extension and how it would work. Perhaps I can commit to consult with the Select Committee if I decide that having an extension is the right thing to do close to the deadline in order for the Select Committee to see my reasoning. I will work with the Select Committee on many of the amendments that my hon. Friend has put forward, because I appreciate that there is concern about scrutiny in Northern Ireland.

The question of the victims’ pension has been raised, and the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) has an amendment on it. As I said to those on the Opposition Front Bench, this is a devolved matter, but I have been working with the Victims’ Commissioner.

Anna Soubry: Can my right hon. Friend reassure me on two things: first, that new clause 7 is a matter of conscience and we on this side of the House will not be whipped on it, and, secondly, that new clause 7 does not change the law or indeed give anybody the power to change the law? The notes are very clear: it is all about accountability to the Secretary of State so that she can look at human rights and make sure the guidance is there. It does not change the law; it is about guidance and accountability on human rights, and it is a matter of conscience.
I want to see progress on this matter, and I want all the work that can be done to be done so that when Ministers are back in Stormont they are able to take those decisions.

I am going to conclude at this point, because a significant number of people wish to speak and I want to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members who have tabled amendments have a chance to speak. I repeat that this Bill is necessary for the people of Northern Ireland so that their public services can continue, and I hope that Members will feel able to support it.

6.45 pm

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the comparative brevity of her remarks, and for her willingness to commit her Minister of State to meeting representatives of the Co-op movement and, more importantly, to meeting them directly herself. I strongly support new clause 7, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for the way in which she spoke to it. I hope that the Committee will forgive me if I briefly touch on the reasons for tabling new clauses 4, 5 and 6, which are tabled in my name and those of a series of hon. Friends on this side of the House.

The new clauses relate to the interests of credit unions, housing co-operatives and energy co-operatives in Northern Ireland. Perhaps I should say at the outset that the largest number of bank branch closures has taken place since the political settlement in Northern Ireland broke down. The two eventualities are not directly related, but the need for a response to the situation clearly exists. Organisations such as credit unions and financial co-operatives have the potential to fill some of the gaps that those bank branch closures have caused. There are no major international banks headquartered in Northern Ireland, and the distance between the decisions that those international banks take and what happens in the communities of Northern Ireland is getting greater and greater.

The only banks that have a Northern Ireland perspective are the credit unions there, and they surely deserve more attention from the civil service in Northern Ireland than they are currently getting. The Secretary of State might not have direct powers in this regard, but she and the Minister of State will be people of considerable influence with the civil servants who do have powers under this legislation, and I hope that she will be willing to lobby on behalf of credit unions in Northern Ireland for a significant share of the financial inclusion pot that the Treasury has set aside. It is currently unallocated and amounts to some £55 million.

I also hope that Ministers will be willing to consider what they can do about the number of people taking on individual voluntary arrangements, causing debts to credit unions not to be paid. This is causing considerable problems for the credit unions. I would also like them to look at issues relating to the funding for energy co-operatives, which is due to run out in April next year, and at the lack of funding and access to land for housing co-operatives. I am grateful to Ministers for their willingness to meet representatives of the Co-operative movement, and on that note, I shall not press my new clauses to a Division.

Anna Soubry: I rise to speak in support of new clause 7, and I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to support this really mild and moderate amendment. It really should not be causing so much agitation, and I think we have to ask ourselves why it is doing so in certain quarters of the House. As many of us discovered when we went to Northern Ireland as guests of Amnesty International, the simple truth is that the laws in Northern Ireland are at best antiquated and at worst barbaric. God forbid that a member of any hon. Member’s family who lived in Northern Ireland were to be raped, but if that woman then found herself to be pregnant, she would not be allowed to terminate her pregnancy even if she had been raped by a member of her own family. She would have no rights and no choice.

In this matter, I have never sought to impose my views on anybody else, but women and young children throughout Northern Ireland have none of the choices that our own constituents have. I met a woman there who was diagnosed with a foetal abnormality when she was 23 weeks pregnant. This was her third attempt to have a child through in vitro fertilisation, and she and her husband were distraught when they were told that their child would die either in the womb or within hours of being born. If they were my constituents, they would have had a choice. They would have been able to talk to their doctor and go through all the available options and, if they so chose, they could have had a termination. That woman was denied all that. She could not even come to England to terminate her pregnancy. She carried that child for 11 weeks as it grew within her womb, with people saying to her, “When is your baby due?” She had to tell them, “My baby is going to die in my womb or it will die within hours of it being delivered.” She had to look at prams, cots and Moses baskets and know that she would never put her child, carried in her womb, into any of them. Her baby did die in the womb, 11 weeks after the diagnosis of a foetal abnormality, and she carried a dead baby for three days before she was finally induced. She gave birth to a baby girl who was decomposing.

Colleagues, right hon. and hon. Members, that is the situation that pertains in Northern Ireland, and new clause 7 seeks not to change that barbaric law, which we want to change—that is why many of us voted with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) yesterday—but to maintain the rights of our fellow citizens of this proud United Kingdom. It merely asks that their human rights are properly monitored and does nothing more than that. I urge Members to vote for new clause 7, and the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who is not in his place, also urges and reminds colleagues that his Marriage (Same Sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Bill returns to this place on Friday. New clause 7 is a matter not just of conscience, but of decent humanity. It is about ensuring that everybody in the United Kingdom has these basic human rights.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her comments about amendment 22 and simply urge her to continue to pursue the creation of pensions for the 500 people who are suffering from severe physical injuries as a result of the conflict.

I also rise to support new clause 7, and I will be brief because the situation is simple for me. I have defended and promoted devolution for a decade, but I never...
thought it would be used as a means of abrogating responsibility for the human rights of anyone within the United Kingdom. It is astonishing that my daughter, who lives in Scotland, could perhaps take up a job in Northern Ireland and then lose the rights that she was born with in the United Kingdom. That cannot be acceptable to anyone in this House, but there are people within the UK who do not have the rights that those of us who sit here today enjoy. New clause 7 would help to put that right, and we should support it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I had not intended to speak, but I listened to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and with great attention to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) who, as the Secretary of State said, argued her case with fluency, passion and understanding. But my right hon. Friend, in essence, said that all the issues, referring back to the ten-minute rule Bill speech of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). Irrespective of what side of the abortion debate line one might find oneself falling, nobody will doubt the passion that the issue evokes or the concern that is expressed.

However, I do say—before anyone starts shouting at me, this may not be the right word to use—that there is a cruelty implicit in new clause 7. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that the Bill’s purpose is not to create new law and that civil servants are not empowered to create new law, the hon. Member for Walthamstow said that her intention is not to ride a coach and horses through or to undermine in any way either the Good Friday agreement or the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Broxtowe—she is a friend—spoke convincingly and movingly. The cruelty of new clause 7 is that, if it is passed, it will raise a huge amount of hope—although not among everyone in the community of Northern Ireland—but it will not address or deliver on that hope. The cases that she cites would in no way be alleviated or resolved by new clause 7. Those who seek a termination of pregnancies is presented by some, including in the Committee, as a very black and white issue, to reject new clause 7, so that we can have proper consideration of this issue in this House or in any other more appropriate Chamber.

Secondly, there is the devolution settlement. The termination of pregnancies is a devolved issue. Regardless of what Members think of my views, they must objectively accept that this is a controversial issue in Northern Ireland. This amendment has been tagged on to a Bill during its accelerated passage through the House. The fact I am standing here with just a couple of minutes to make these points emphasises that this is the wrong way to do it. I urge Members, regardless of their views on the substantive issue, to reject new clause 7, so that we can have proper consideration of this issue in this House or in any other more appropriate Chamber.

In the UK, termination of pregnancy is very clearly a devolved issue. I accept that there are some complications in relation to the legal cases, and it may be, for the first time, on very narrow grounds of life-limiting conditions—fetal foetal abnormality, and rape and incest, potentially—that this is ruled to be a human rights issue under the European convention on human rights. If that happens, it becomes a more complex issue, not just for the UK, but for all signatories to that convention, because there will be horizontal impacts from that type of decision. But in the first instance the courts have recognised that this is rightly for the relevant democratic body, which in this case is clearly the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The third issue I wish to raise is workability. As has been mentioned, new clause 7 attempts, through guidance, to change the law. As the Secretary of State has clearly said, guidance cannot do that. Any change in the law in Northern Ireland will require legislative
change, so this provision is asking the Secretary of State to ask officials to do something that is simply impossible in law. That would be explored in much more detail, and in adequate detail, if we had more time to scrutinise the new clause. That in itself proves to me that this is the inappropriate vehicle for this, regardless of the substantive issues involved. I urge everybody in this Chamber to consider this matter, give it the appropriate time at a later stage and reject new clause 7 now.

Nigel Mills: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

7.1 pm
Six hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Business of the House motion, the proceedings were interrupted (Order, this day).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

NI Ministerial appointment functions: specified offices

Amendment made: 23, page 4, line 21, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

'(4) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (3) may not be made unless—

(a) a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament, or

(b) the regulations declare that the Secretary of State considers it to be expedient for the regulations to be made without the approval mentioned in paragraph (a).

(4A) Where regulations contain a declaration under subsection (4)(b)—

(a) the instrument containing the regulations must be laid before Parliament after being made, and

(b) if the instrument is not approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament before the end of the period of 28 days beginning with the day on which the instrument is made, the regulations cease to have effect (with the result that any entries that the regulations added to the table in subsection (2) are omitted).

(4B) Subsection (4A)(b)—

(a) does not affect the validity of anything done as a result of the regulations before they ceased to have effect;

(b) does not prevent the re-exercise of the regulation-making power under subsection (3) in the same way.

(4C) In calculating the period of 28 days mentioned in subsection (4A)(b), no account is to be taken of any time during which Parliament is dissolved or prorogued or during which both Houses are adjourned for more than four days.”—(Karen Bradley.)

This amendment makes the regulation-making power in Clause 4(3) of the Bill subject to the draft affirmative procedure or, in cases where the Secretary of State considers it expedient, the made affirmative procedure.

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 5 and 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
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Question accordingly agreed to.

New clause 7 read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

The House divided:

**Ayes**: 344, **Noes**: 26.

**Division No. 251**

[7.18 pm]

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Simpson, David
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomson, Ross
Vickers, Martin
Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Noes:
Fiona Bruce and
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EDUCATION
That the draft Higher Education (Transparency Condition and Financial Support) (England) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 June, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
That the draft West of England Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

That the draft Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—(Mims Davies.)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENT

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

EXCHANGING DATA WITH NON-EU COUNTRIES

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 5191/17, a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and Council on Exchanging and Protecting Data in a Globalised World, and an Unnumbered European Union proposal for provisions on Cross-border data flows and protection of personal data and privacy; welcomes the adequacy framework as an effective means of ensuring a free flow of data from the EU to third countries; and further notes that in the context of the UK leaving the EU it provides the right starting point.—(Mims Davies.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Kings Langley Green Belt

7.34 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak this evening on behalf of the residents of the wonderful and beautiful village of Kings Langley in the green belt in Hertfordshire. I am all for housing. My constituency is desperately short of housing, but we must make sure that, at the same time as building new housing and new social housing, we protect the green environment that makes villages such as Kings Langley so beautiful, and in particular the farm land, including Wayside dairy farm, run brilliantly by my friend, Charlie Wray. I have been asked to present the following petition: The petition of residents of Kings Langley, Declares strong opposition to plans under consideration in Dacorum Borough Councils Local Plan 2017 that would mean the loss of valuable farmland and the demise of Wayside Dairy Farm and other local green areas. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to protect the Green Belt in and around the village of Kings Langley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

European Baccalaureate Qualification

7.35 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This petition relates to the Europa School, which is a free school located in my constituency. It is a petition that has 2,469 signatures. The petition of teachers at, parents of pupils at, or friends of the Europa School Culham, Oxfordshire, Declares that in relation to the Europa School, the school currently offers children who attend the school a final qualification of the European Baccalaureate (EB). The ability of the school to offer this qualification has been extended by the Department of Education to 2021. However, uncertainty over the school’s ability to offer the qualification after 2021 is causing difficulties for students and much uncertainty. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons asks the Department of Education to allow the Europa School in Culham, Oxfordshire, to offer to its students from 2021 the European Baccalaureate as an equivalent to A levels regardless of the status of the UK in respect of its membership of the European Union.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002270]

[P002276]
Home Insulation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mims Davies.]

7.37 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to bring to the Government’s attention their approach to detrimental home insulation issues. I am pleased to have secured the debate to talk about the terrible conditions suffered by some of my constituents who live in the Fishwick area of Preston. The source of their complaints is work first carried out between January and June 2013.

The work was a Government scheme aimed at improving the thermal efficiency of homes by providing wall insulation. The aim, of course, was to lower heating bills in properties where many people were likely to be suffering from fuel poverty. The Fishwick area is one of the poorer areas of the city of Preston and the success of this scheme should have been very important to improve the lives of these people. The funding for this scheme was secured in September 2012 from InterGen, the managing agent for the scheme was Anesco, and the contractor for the scheme was called Ecogen. In total, 387 properties in Fishwick had work carried out as part of this scheme.

As I said earlier, the work was completed in June 2013, and in October that year, tragically, Ecogen was liquidated. By December 2013, the complaints started to flood in. By January 2014, the complaints were referred to the managing agent, Anesco. By March 2014, the complaints were referred to Ofgem.

Between March and December 2014, Ofgem undertook an investigation into the scheme. In December 2014, Ofgem decided to issue an enforcement order to have the work rectified. By April 2015, independent surveys were carried out by the energy partnership with a view to rectifying the work. By August 2015 a second set of independent surveys were carried out and, at the same time, the entire scheme was referred to what was then the Department of Energy and Climate Change. This was complemented by the Bonfield review, which was launched in 2015 by DECC in the wake of the failure of the green deal. The purpose of the review was to examine and make recommendations about how consumers can be protected and advised when installing energy efficiency and renewable energy measures in their homes.

By this time, of course, it was clear that the residents of the 387 homes in the Fishwick area had been living in substandard conditions for three years, with properties suffering from damp, fungus and mushroom development on the walls at various times throughout the year. They were living in extreme humidity because of the way in which the cladding attached to the building had contained water and allowed it to accumulate for long periods inside the building. Quite apart from the humidity and smell being extremely uncomfortable for the residents, it was also a health hazard that resulted in complaints of illness from various residents of the properties.

On 5 February 2016, I was made aware of these problems for the first time at a public meeting held at the Sahara community centre in Fishwick, following which I emailed the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who was then the Secretary of State at DECC, to ask her to make funding available as a matter of urgency as well as an emergency fund to deal with water ingress. I then received a response from the noble Lord Bourne, who said in his letter of 17 March 2016 that in such cases complaints should be referred to a local citizens advice bureau or Ofgem. It is understandable that Ofgem should be involved, but how on earth can the citizens advice bureau help? It was clear from my letter to the Secretary of State and the attachment that the contractor, Ecogen, had been liquidated and it was therefore not just a simple case of going back to the contractor and getting them to put the work right. Special help was required to help put right the defective work.

As a result of my persistence, in early June 2016, I received an email from the National Energy Action fuel poverty charity that stated that a total pot of £2.5 million could be made available to Preston City Council to assist people trapped in the scheme if Preston City Council was prepared to take on the role of managing the remedial work. Unfortunately, the NEA had to contact me on the matter because it had yet to receive any response from the city council. I later found out that one of the council officials had sat on the letter from the NEA and not referred the matter to either the chief executive at the time, Lorraine Norris, or the councillors for the Fishwick ward. I believe that this was because the council officer concerned was reluctant to take on the role of managing the remedial work and therefore did not pass on the correspondence from the fuel poverty charity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is raising a specific point about his constituency, but I want to refer briefly if I may to Northern Ireland, where the fuel poverty figures have dropped by some 22%. That is in no small part due to the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme, or NISEP, which ring-fences some 80% of funding specifically to help vulnerable and low-income families install efficiency measures in their homes. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that working alongside housing associations in Northern Ireland and with NISEP would be something the Minister could consider and an excellent way of ensuring that vulnerable people could install efficiency measures in their own homes and get the help to which he is referring?

Sir Mark Hendrick: I concur with the hon. Gentleman. Whether it is with Northern Ireland authorities or with our own Government, there is no reason why there should not be good co-operation and good insulation schemes. That is what I would have expected with these 387 houses in my constituency.

In the meantime, I requested a meeting with the Secretary of State on the matter, as a matter of urgency. Except for a very brief encounter in the House of Commons Tea Room, when the Secretary of State said that she was looking into the matter as she passed me by, she seemed uninterested in the case and reluctant to discuss the matter. She did, however, refer me to an official, who then assured me that Preston City Council was working with the NEA fuel poverty charity. However, what the Department did not know was that this was the case only because of my direct intervention and contact with the chief executive of Preston City Council at the time, because, as I said earlier, the council officer had sat on the letter from the NEA.

By July 2016, the chief executive was indicating that she needed extra funding in order to carry out surveys to get a “detailed picture of issues”, so clearly the
£2.5 million was not enough to deal with the problems, and in fact was only to be targeted at those homes which had complained about the work—62 of the 387 homes. That did not take account of the fact that many of the other homes had problems, but because the residents thought that people in other properties were complaining on their behalf as well, they did not come forward and make their direct complaints. Therefore, the fact that work was to be carried out on the 62 properties only, neglected all the work that needed to be carried out on the other affected properties, whose residents, for a variety of reasons, had not come forward and made their own complaints. That was, in my view, totally unjust and short-sighted.

On 24 November 2016, I emailed the Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark)—to ask what assurances and safeguards were in place to ensure that the properties would be safe, dry and warm, and that any installations would be done in a professional manner. In December 2016, BIS responded, asking for more detail. In January 2017, my office contacted BIS to ask what detail it required. My office staff were told that the policy team would get in touch. We waited and waited, and the policy team did not get in touch. However, work was already under way on the 62 properties, which were designated as phase 1. Those properties that were left were designated as phase 2, and the residents were told that they would be surveyed. However, there was no indication from any organisation as to how or if funding would be made available for phase 2.

In the meantime, I received an email from Councillor Martyn Rawlinson of Preston City Council, telling me that the management of the repairs on the 62 houses was as bad as the original work that was carried out. Some of the houses had been left half done for several months. E.ON originally said that all repairs necessary would be done, but E.ON was then saying that homeowners should get their own insurers to get the work completed, which was outrageous—an absolute disgrace—and by then the residents had been putting up with this nonsense for four years, with many of them having work done twice to their property, and still not to their satisfaction.

By 29 November 2017, I was ready to let E.ON know about my concerns over the progression of the remedial works, and asked it for a timescale setting out when all the works would be carried out and completed, and for a point of contact to be established for the residents. My office chased E.ON for a response for over a month, and a month later—January 2018—we finally received correspondence. E.ON confirmed that it was trying to divert attention from its responsibilities in the matter towards Preston City Council, which had no direct responsibility, and still has no direct responsibility, for the work to be carried out. It is E.ON that surveyed the houses in August 2017 for phase 2 of the repairs. I am told that those so-called “surveys” were in fact not proper surveys, but door-knocking exercises to ask people whether they were having problems, or had had problems previously—nothing at all was done on the properties—and certainly nothing that could generate a work order to remedy what problems they were having. In addition there is not, and has not been, any indication from the Government or E.ON of how the rest of the work for the 300-plus houses will be financed. We are seeing good will, but nothing in the way of resources to complete the work.

On 11 February I received an email from Councillor Martyn Rawlinson, with photographs of some horrific scenes within houses due to the damp issues. It is inconceivable that people should be left to live in such conditions, with no one apparently willing to rectify the problems as soon as possible.

On 8 March this year, I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), describing my disappointment with the then Secretary of State and the Department, and appealing for help. On 27 March I received a response from the Under-Secretary telling me that the responsibility had moved from her Department to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

I tabled a series of parliamentary questions to BEIS about the use of cladding on properties. That culminated in a letter from BEIS indicating that remedial work on 62 of the properties should be completed shortly, and that E.ON was in discussions with National Energy Action to help other households. In the meantime I received a variety of complaints from the residents, one claiming to have spent £1,500 after a ceiling caved in after wet weather. In a separate case, an elderly homeowner had to leave her property and move in with her son because the damp was affecting her health.

Since then, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth has responded to my parliamentary question, PQ177184, indicating that the retrofit on 62 of the properties was completed in the summer of this year and that work has been carried out to estimate the extent of the work that is necessary to sort out the work required to the other properties. As I said earlier, that resulted in questions being asked on the doorstep. In addition, talks have been taking place between Ofgem, BEIS and the energy suppliers in an attempt to secure funding for the remaining houses.

This saga has been running for six years, from 2012 to where we are now, in October 2018. It has been an absolute tragedy for those living in those 387 houses, who have been trying to put up with substandard housing and great inconvenience. The result has been unsafe properties with associated health risks. In the meantime, I am reliably informed that in many cases the cladding has been removed, but properties have been left with holes in the walls. The landlord has said that they will be finishing off the work, but will only repair the holes and paint the brickwork. They are not prepared to install any new insulation. One of the complainants wonders where the money has gone for the work that should have been done to her property. The landlord has told her that she should speak to E.ON or Preston City Council.

Let me tell the Minister that I recall spending three years in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett). During that time, when my party was in government, we dealt with fuel poverty issues through the Warm Front scheme, which was applied to about 10,000 homes in my constituency, particularly in the area of Deepdale. The scheme focused...
on energy efficiency by installing new central heating boilers and providing loft insulation and double glazing for terraced housing that was not too different from the housing that we see in Fishwick ward. It was extremely effective, and popular with residents.

May I ask the Minister why the more recent schemes that are using cladding of the type mentioned in Fishwick are being employed when the detriment to both property and residents is known? Why has it taken six years to get to where we are now for the residents of Fishwick? Are the Government willing to help to direct the residents to a satisfactory and available source of finance to rescue what is, in fact, a Government scheme?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I was in that Department during the period of the last Labour Government. One of the things that is absent here is enforcement, but, more important, if there is a Government scheme and the Government are subsidising it, there should be a list of approved quality builders, perhaps with certifications. I have also found, in isolated cases with which I have dealt, that it is mainly elderly people who cannot get redress. They are told to go to the consumerist trading standards offices are understaffed, and they have limited powers under the law. Should we not do something about some of those matters?

Sir Mark Hendrick: I agree with my hon. Friend. When I was in DEFRA there were recommended contractors. Those contractors could ensure a certain level of quality and even though we got the odd complaint from people under the Warm Front scheme, we did not get anything like the number of complaints or the state of the work that we get now. Unfortunately, the company in question has gone into liquidation, but the Government should still look at how they can help.

Why have the residents of Fishwick had to endure this substandard work and why has it not been rectified properly despite the fact that the contracting company, Ecogen, went into liquidation soon after that work was completed? Why do the Government not concentrate on energy-efficient boilers, loft insulation and double glazing? The Minister might well tell me that in other areas they are concentrating on those solutions, but then why is there this move towards cladding—an ugly and harmful solution?

I am thankful for securing this debate and look forward to hearing the answers to my questions from the Minister.

7.56 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I am genuinely interested to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) tonight. The points he makes about dump living conditions and the impact that has on people’s health and whether their homes are fit for purpose also apply in my constituency and are of enormous importance.

I will start by saying that I do not think that what has happened has been good enough. I will also say something that I will repeat at the end of my speech, which is that I am going to instruct one person in my Department to act as the broker and bring together all the people who have played a part in the problem and can also be part of the solution. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman. I am also going to take a moment to set out where the issues the hon. Gentleman raised about this scheme are being addressed fully in the latest iteration of the schemes we are using to help people living in fuel poverty—the ECO3 scheme.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, the scheme he is referring to in his constituency was the community energy saving programme, or CESP, which was set up by the previous Labour Government. All the shortcomings of that scheme—no guarantee and no list of installers—were a function of the scheme design at that time. That is one reason why that scheme was closed by the coalition Government in 2012, and a number of penalties were issued for companies under that scheme because, as the hon. Gentleman’s constituents well know, it had not delivered what had been required both in terms of the carbon savings and the quality of work.

Fishwick was then part of this mitigation activity that was undertaken by InterGen. I totally agree that solid wall insulation is not a suitable way to reduce energy consumption in many homes in the country, but that was part of InterGen’s mitigation scheme. As the hon. Gentleman knows only too well—it is one of the reasons why he is a long-standing champion in this place—this issue has been going on for many years. There were problems as a result of those installations. Ofgem then received complaints from 62 households, although I know the complaints pool is much larger. Those were offered remedial work which was delivered by E.ON. But as the hon. Gentleman also knows, there are real concerns about the quality of that work, because, as he said, it is not good enough to rip the cladding off and leave holes in the wall; people expect to have a warm home that can breathe and is fit to live in.

I understand that E.ON provided some additional funding to carry out the necessary structural work. I am told it carried out full structural surveys, but if the hon. Gentleman is telling me that that was not the case, that is certainly something to investigate further. Some homeowners of course declined to have extra work; there were issues gaining entry and so forth. If full surveys were not carried out, we need to know that, which is why I am keen that we have one point of contact in my Department to get to the truth of the matter.

Since that work was undertaken in the summer of 2017, more complaints have emerged—over 180. As the hon. Gentleman set out, the installer no longer exists. We are insisting on appropriate guarantees through ECO, but the Fishwick homes, which are a strong failure of the scheme put in place by that Labour Government, did not have any guarantees required from any installer, and the Solid Wall Insulation Guarantee Agency now set up to be a backstop did not exist at the time.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I fully take what the Minister is saying to be correct, but I would have expected the guarantees and quality of work that we saw in the Warm Front programme to be carried over into this scheme if it was indeed put together by the Labour Government prior to the coalition. I am very surprised to hear that that was not the case, but obviously I believe what the Minister says.

Claire Perry: The great thing about these debates is that we do not have to focus too much on the politics, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that some very good designs and functions were put in place under the
warm home scheme, and they have very much influenced the design of the energy company obligation, which is the replacement for CESP.

Perhaps I can give the hon. Gentleman some comfort in relation to other constituents who are receiving measures under this scheme by telling him that the design flaws have been addressed. We have worked with the British Standards Institution to develop new standards over and above building regulations standards for any eco-obligation, and any installer that wants to be part of the scheme must meet those technical standards. All solid and cavity wall installations must be accompanied by a guarantee that gives financial assurance even if the company providing the guarantee cannot honour it. There has to be a bond in place to provide sufficient coverage of at least 25 years, including full replacement or remediation, and to provide a verified quality assurance tick, which we would expect our constituents to be able to rely on in terms of the quality of the work and the products that are being installed.

In July 2015, we commissioned the “Each Home Counts” review. This has been a further key driver of developments in this area. The hon. Gentleman might also have heard of the TrustMark scheme that I launched last week during Green Great Britain week. It sets out a clear code of conduct for businesses. He might also receive complaints, as I do, about cold calling and the aggressive selling of these products, which are completely unacceptable. A process guarantee and rigorous new technical standards to tackle poor design and installation will be published next spring. I entirely agree with him that robust monitoring is key, and enforcement activities are the way to ensure that this happens.

I want to bring comfort to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, but I know that it is no comfort to learn that some of the failings in the scheme design of 2009 that have caused such problems for them have given us lessons from which we have learned. I was pleased this week to bring forward the next set of measures to support ECO3. It will now be focused 100% on the alleviation of fuel poverty right across the UK, and I hope that some of his constituents will benefit from that.

**Sir Mark Hendrick:** Just before the Minister finishes, will she address the matter of finance for the remaining homes and whether the Government can be of any assistance?

**Claire Perry:** The hon. Gentleman anticipates my final remarks. I am fully sympathetic towards what he said, and I am sorry that he has been given the runaround over the years, because he has been doughty in raising such points. There is such a complex array of people involved. He referenced Preston City Council, and I am disappointed that it has been less than active historically, particularly in working with some of the agencies with which he has set up relationships. It sounds as though InterGen, E.ON and Ofgem also need to be corralled into a place where we can come up with a solution.

The scheme’s design, under which insulation is independently installed, never included a backstop to Government finance, although the hon. Gentleman may say that that ought to be a requirement. I therefore do not have any money in any of my budgets to meet the funding requirements, but given that many of the companies are still in operation and will still want to work during the scheme—the market for them is substantial—I feel strongly that they ought to do the right thing and work out ways to fix the problems and ensure that residents are happy.

I will write to the hon. Gentleman shortly with the name and contact details of a person in my Department whom I will task with bringing things together and who will report back to me with progress on a regular basis. I am happy to discuss that progress with the hon. Gentleman, either in the Tea Room or more formally. Lessons have been learned, although I appreciate that that is no comfort for residents who have been bedevilled with problems, but we can work together to try to sort things out.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.4 pm

*House adjourned.*
Deferred Division

Electricity

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 203.

Division No. 249]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Aragar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Brind, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caines, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Chris

Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann,cott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merron, Johnny
Merriman, Huw

Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stone, Jamie
24 OCTOBER 2018

Deferred Division

Onasanya, Fiona

Question accordingly agreed to.
The House of Commons

Thursday 25 October 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

No Deal: UK Border Delays

1. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU.

[907258]

6. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU.

[907264]

7. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU.

[907265]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): The Government have published 106 technical notices addressing the no-deal scenario. We are striving for a good deal with our European Union partners, but we will be ready for all outcomes from the negotiations.

Gerald Jones: Recent National Audit Office estimates state that if customs declarations are required for trading between the UK and the EU, the total number of declarations could increase by about 360%, from 55 million currently on non-EU trade to 225 million. What estimate has the Minister made of the additional staff that will be required and, not least, the likely tailbacks that could ensue at UK ports?

Dominic Raab: There certainly is a risk of no deal, especially if the EU engages in a deliberately intransigent approach. The hon. Gentleman asks about staff. We are recruiting 300 extra staff, with a further 600 planned. We have given a range of advice through our 106 technical notices, half of which gave advice on customs procedures for businesses. There have been 300,000 letters sent to current customs users and 145,000 letters to VAT-registered businesses.

Liz McInnes: The Health Secretary told pharmaceutical companies to stockpile six weeks’ worth of medicines in case of a no-deal Brexit because of potential delays at the border. Will the Brexit Secretary confirm whether he envisages circumstances where companies could be asked to stockpile for longer than six weeks?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, not least because Government and the pharmaceutical industry already liaise on stockpiling for far longer periods in other circumstances, including in relation to vaccines. We will keep it under review, but this is something the industry is used to doing and we are used to co-operating with it.

Sandy Martin: In September, the Borders Delivery Group reported that 11 of the 12 major projects to replace or change key IT systems were at risk of not being delivered on time or in a workable condition. Many of my constituents who work at the port of Felixstowe are at their wits’ end about how this is going to work. Can the Secretary of State tell us what is going to be done with those IT systems?

Dominic Raab: We had an extended Cabinet session last month. We looked at a whole range of action points right across the piece, including some of the IT issues to which the hon. Gentleman refers. We want to make sure that we are in the best position to manage, avoid or mitigate any risk in a no-deal scenario, but of course we are striving for the best deal with our European partners.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A very significant number of automotive parts enter the UK and the European Union from third countries for just-in-time delivery. It seems to work, doesn’t it?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend will know that that is one of the reasons the White Paper proposals deal with the kind of customs arrangements and co-operation with our EU partners which will not just prevent friction at the border, but, particularly in relation to just-in-time manufacturers, provide them with the frictionless trade they need.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Can we be absolutely sure that, should this House reject a deal brought back by the Government, we will still leave the European Union on 29 March, and that those who vote against that deal will be responsible for no deal?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend raises, responsibly and assiduously, the stark reality of those who would seek to wreck the deal, as the Labour party leadership has suggested, come what may. Every hon. Member of this House will have a choice to make between the good deal we are confident we will bring back and the alternatives.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in the event of no deal the UK Government will not create a hard border on the island of Ireland? And if we do not do it, who does he think will?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is attempting to draw me down an avenue of inquiry I will not be pursuing. What I will say is that we have made it clear that under no circumstances will we see or erect a hard border in relation to Northern Ireland.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): This week the NAO warned that not a single one of the Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ preparations for a no-deal Brexit...
was in anything other than a red-amber state of lack of preparedness. That is on top of the 80,000 lost Scottish jobs, £2,300 out of the pockets of every Scottish household and a 9% hit to our economy that a no-deal Brexit is likely to bring. Is the Secretary of State seriously telling us that it is possible for him and the Prime Minister to bring back a bad deal that is worse than that?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the risks of no deal, but the point is to have the planning and preparations in place to ensure we can avoid or mitigate those risks. In addition to the remarks I made earlier, £8 million of funding for customs intermediaries has been announced. We also need to prepare for the worst-case scenario, whereby the authorities at Calais are deliberately directing a go-slow approach, by supporting a diversion of the flow to more amenable ports in other countries.

Peter Grant: HMRC will not have the capacity to cope and the Border Force will not have the capacity to cope, but at least we know that the Government’s capacity for incompetence is utterly unbounded. The Secretary of State is criticising others for so-called intransigence. Is it not time for the Government to drop their own intransigent stance, go right back to the beginning, rub out the three stupid red lines and start again?

Dominic Raab: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that at this late stage of negotiations, we can go back to the beginning, I am afraid his approach is rather delusional. We have made good progress and we are close to agreeing a deal. The responsible thing for Members from all parts of the House to do, regardless of their views on Brexit, is to get behind the Government so we can clinch that good deal for all quarters and all parts of the UK.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Has the Secretary of State made the Republic of Ireland aware that if the French start mucking about with Calais and a go-slow in the event of no deal, the biggest impact will be not on UK trade but on trade with the Republic of Ireland that passes through this country?

Dominic Raab: I am confident that the authorities in Dublin are well aware of the implications of no deal. All of us, on all sides—not just in this House but in the EU—want to lock horns, close the outstanding issues and seal the good deal that will serve everyone’s interests.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As you will know, Mr Speaker, Labour’s 2017 general election manifesto was rightly hailed as a transformative blueprint for Britain that works for the many, not the few, but even we did not go so far as to propose the nationalisation of roll-off, roll-on lorry ferries. In addition to contingency plans for Government-owned or operated logistics, can the Secretary of State tell us which other industries the Government are considering taking into public ownership under a no-deal scenario?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to look at all possible contingencies to ensure that in a no-deal scenario British businesses and livelihoods are safeguarded. I think it was rather unfortunate of him to refer to the Labour manifesto, because with the Labour party’s current commitment to rejecting any deal that the Government bring back opening the door to a second referendum, the Labour leadership have driven a coach and horses straight through the promises that they made to every Labour voter at the last election.

Leaving the EU

2. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect the integrity of the UK after the UK leaves the EU.

[907259]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): We are negotiating to secure a strong deal that works for the whole United Kingdom, and our White Paper proposals will deliver on that.

Giles Watling: I do not believe in a second referendum, and I have grave doubts about referendums in general. We had the vote, and the people voted to leave. I voted to remain. Now, after all this time and division, what are we going to do to heal the scars left by the referendum?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; a second referendum would create far more uncertainty than it would resolve, and would erode public trust in our democracy. We will heal the divisions created by the campaign and the politics of Brexit by delivering on the outcome of the referendum, and by making sure that we deliver jobs for working families and build homes for the next generation beyond the Brexit negotiations.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Now that we know that the referendum that delivered this entire process was conducted illegally, surely that is another reason to give us all a people’s vote at the end of the process. The Secretary of State can have his Bill endorsed, and we can have the option to remain, because we know what that looks like.

Dominic Raab: I always listen to the hon. Lady, who is thoughtful and passionate in her views. However, I think that a second referendum would create a huge amount of uncertainty, returning us to square one and eroding public trust in the system.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend been able respectfully to persuade our negotiating partners that Northern Ireland is not some enclave of the character of those around the area of the Bodensee, for example, but an integral part of the United Kingdom that is not, in any circumstances, to be split off from our country?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have made the point that we would never accept any proposals that would threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom, whether constitutional or economic. We have also made the point that a lot of the proposals that we have seen would not be acceptable to many on the EU side, given the separatist pressures in places such as Corsica, Catalonia and other parts of Europe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that Brexit represents a real opportunity to become a global United Kingdom, free to make vital
trade deals with countries across the world? Does he feel that increasing the backstop would be unhelpful because it would only hamper our ability to negotiate trade deals and would not help to resolve any outstanding issues?

**Dominic Raab:** I certainly agree that we must secure the right deal that strikes the right balance between preserving the frictionless trade that we want with our EU partners and taking advantage of the global opportunities of the future, from Latin America to Asia. We have committed ourselves to providing a backstop in case there is a gap between the end of the implementation period and the coming into effect of the future relationship, but we will do nothing to threaten—and will not accept anything that does threaten—the integrity of the United Kingdom.

**Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): Every nation in our Union exports more to the rest of the UK than it does to the EU27, and the UK internal market accounts for 61% of Scotland’s exports. Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will do what makes sense for the Union and for the Scottish economy?

**Dominic Raab:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is true that we have a large export relationship with our EU partners, but equally, as the EU itself recognises, the vast majority—the lion’s share—of future growth opportunities will lie with the growth markets of the future, from Latin America to Asia, as I said earlier.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last Sunday, when the Secretary of State was asked on “The Andrew Marr Show” how long the proposed UK-wide customs backstop might last, he said:

“It could be time-limited, there could be another mechanism.”

Whichever of the two it turns out to be, can the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that the backstop—if needed—would not be terminated before the conclusion of our negotiations on the future partnership? If he is not able to give that assurance, will he tell the House what would replace it to ensure that the border in Northern Ireland remained open?

**Dominic Raab:** The Chair of the Select Committee is right to say that we need to respect our commitment to provide a bridge between the end of the implementation period and the future relationship. That does need to be something we are not locked into indefinitely, and, of course, the EU side cannot agree anything under article 50—which provides only for the winding down of the EU arrangements—that would allow something to be indefinite, so this ought to be a matter that there is mutual interest in and agreement on resolving.

**Border Arrangements**

3. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What progress he has made on securing an agreement with the EU on future border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. [907260]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab):** Our White Paper proposals will ensure that there is frictionless trade at the border, which is in the interests of businesses but will also avoid any potential extra infrastructure at the border in Northern Ireland.

**Kevin Brennan:** Does the Secretary of State understand why some of us who have Irish heritage are worried by what is said by some Conservative Members such as the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who said a moment ago that under no circumstances could Northern Ireland be split off from the United Kingdom? He knows full well that the Belfast agreement envisages that prospect if the people of Northern Ireland and the people of Ireland agree to it, and that is Government policy. Will he confirm his commitment to the Belfast agreement, and will he also confirm the Government’s commitment to the agreement made last December with the EU about the future of the border in Northern Ireland?

**Dominic Raab:** I certainly do understand all the sensitivities on this side. In fairness, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was referring to the negotiations, and whether we would accept anything relating to them that would have the effect of drawing a line down the Irish sea or threatening the integrity of the UK. But, of course, the Belfast agreement says that nothing should happen in relation to Northern Ireland without the consent of Northern Ireland, and we will not allow the EU to threaten that.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Last week I met a group of young people from Northern Ireland who were members of Our Future Our Choice. They were clearly extremely worried about the border arrangements, and also very worried that they might not retain the right that I have had, and the Secretary of State has had, to live, work and study in the European Union. What guarantees can the Secretary of State give them that they will be able to continue to do that after we have left the EU?

**Dominic Raab:** I think we can provide that assurance, not just in relation to the progress that we have made in the withdrawal agreement, but as a result of the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that would guarantee the rights of EU nationals in the event of no deal. For those who are anxious about the uncertainty that lies ahead, the very worst outcome would be a second referendum, which is the policy of the Liberal Democrats, and which would only make that uncertainty worse.

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): On Monday, the Prime Minister said that if the UK and the EU were to make a legally binding commitment to a “temporary UK-EU joint customs territory”.—[Official Report, 22 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 47.] Is the EU’s proposal for a Northern Ireland-specific customs proposal “no longer needed”? If it is “no longer needed”, does that mean that it will no longer be in the withdrawal agreement, or does the Prime Minister really mean that she thinks it will no longer ever need to come into force?

**Dominic Raab:** I think the Prime Minister was very clear on that. We will not be able to accept any Northern Ireland-specific arrangement that would leave Northern Ireland in a customs regime that was separate from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. It is as simple as that.
Transition Period

4. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What changes there will be in the relationship between the UK and the EU during the transition period after the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union **(Suella Braverman):** After the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019 the implementation period will provide a bridge to our future relationship, ensuring that citizens and businesses only have to plan for one set of changes. During the implementation period the UK will no longer be a member state of the EU, nor will it have MEPs at the European Parliament or a judge at the European Court of Justice. We will have the freedom to negotiate, sign and ratify new trade deals with third countries, although they will not come into force until the end of the implementation period.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but clearly the position should be that on day zero we are a full member of the EU and by the end of the transition period we have no connection other than the future arrangements that we have. It seems to me that instead of a curve as we reduce the transition period, all we have is a postponing of the cliff edge and a delayed departure. Will my hon. Friend comment?

Suella Braverman: I take note of my hon. Friend’s comments. The aim of the implementation period is to provide certainty for businesses and individuals with access to each other’s markets on terms similar to those today. There will be a number of changes to reflect the UK’s new status as a third country—those I mentioned before—but crucially we have got new opportunities to start taking steps to enjoy our new freedoms, and that time should be used effectively.

20. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is reported that the Government are considering a proposal to make the transition period renewable on an annual basis. Are those reports accurate?

Suella Braverman: No.

Carbon Tax

5. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on proposals to introduce a carbon tax to replace the EU emissions trading system in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union **(Chris Heaton-Harris):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Secretary of State and I meet regularly with ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of EU exit-related matters. As the recently published meeting climate change requirements technical notice made clear, in the unlikely event of no deal the UK Government will initially meet our existing carbon pricing commitments via the tax system, taking effect in 2019.

Alex Cunningham: The carbon tax as outlined would be devastating for companies such as CF Fertilisers in Stockton and energy-intensive industries across the country. Will the level of relief against the proposed carbon tax or any other new arrangement for energy-intensive industries leave exposed industries with no greater financial burden than they have under the EU emissions trading scheme?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is a very good question for a Treasury Minister. More details will follow at next week’s Budget, with legislation to follow in the upcoming Finance Bill.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Some excellent biotechnology research is going on in universities across the UK, including in my constituency. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that will continue to be the case after 29 March next year?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government are committed to ensure that science and new technologies such as the one the hon. Gentleman mentions are able to continue and thrive in a future relationship, deal or no deal.

Gibraltar

8. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that HM Government of Gibraltar is consulted throughout the negotiations for the UK to leave the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union **(Mr Robin Walker):** The Government remain committed to fully involving the Government of Gibraltar as we leave the EU together. We have been working closely together including through the Joint Ministerial Council for Gibraltar on EU negotiations, which has met seven times since the referendum. In addition, I am in regular contact with the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, most recently at the Gibraltar Day celebrations in London this week, when we both welcomed the real progress made in negotiations.

Nigel Huddleston: I warmly welcome the apparent agreement on Gibraltar with our Spanish friends—and I do mean friends, because 10,000 Spaniards work in Gibraltar every day, the UK is Spain’s fifth biggest trading partner, and 18 million Brits went to Spain last year. Will the Minister confirm that it is in the best interests of Spain, Gibraltar and the UK that we have as frictionless a flow of goods, tourists and workers as possible?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: a good deal is in the interests of all sides. Gibraltar is an engine of prosperity for the surrounding area, and a deal that benefits Gibraltar will also benefit the wider region. A well-managed and smoothly operational Gibraltar-Spain border is vital for prosperity. It is important not only for the flow of frontier workers, but, as my hon. Friend says, for the flow of tourists and other visitors, who make a key contribution to Gibraltar’s thriving economy. And our strong relations with Spain are underpinned by deep economic, cultural and people-to-people links, which we want to strengthen moving forward. We look forward to enhanced co-operation, which will benefit Spain, Gibraltar and the UK.
Mr Speaker: That was very interesting, but rather long.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is most significant indeed that yesterday the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, in saluting the support the Prime Minister has personally given to the negotiations, observed that for the first time the Prime Minister of Spain has publicly accepted that the inclusion of a protocol to protect the interests of Gibraltar is a done deal if there is a deal and an agreement? Does that not demonstrate how important it is for any friend of Gibraltar that there is a deal and it is carried in this House?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that he has worked assiduously through the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar to protect and promote the interests of Gibraltar. I would like to return the compliment to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, who has played a crucial role in these negotiations.

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Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that he has worked assiduously through the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar to protect and promote the interests of Gibraltar. I would like to return the compliment to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, who has played a crucial role in these negotiations.

Environmental Protection

9. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the effect on UK environmental protection of the UK leaving the EU? [907267]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): We continue to have regular conversations with ministerial colleagues across the Government on all aspects of exiting the European Union, including environmental policy. The UK has a long history of environmental protection, and the Government have been clear that they have no intention of weakening our current environmental protections as we leave the European Union.

Karen Lee: I visited one of my local schools a few weeks ago, and the young people there are very worried about plastic use. This Government are unambitiously pledging to eliminate avoidable plastic waste significantly later than the EU target. Does the Minister agree with me and with the children at the Lincoln Carlton Academy that, with climate change posing an immediate threat, Britain’s environmental protections must not be downgraded after we leave the EU?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, and we would not be doing that. In fact, the Prime Minister has announced that a new environment Bill will be introduced in the second Session to build on the vision we have set out in our 25-year environment plan to leave our precious environment in a better state than the one we inherited. It will help us to create richer habitats for wildlife, improve air and water quality and curb the scourge of plastic in the world’s oceans.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister seriously believe that the Home Office will be able to cope with the number of applications from EU citizens, when its existing immigration systems are in overload?
Dominic Raab: I have had a number of conversations with the Home Secretary and indeed with the Cabinet to ensure that not only the legislation but the operational systems will be in place.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): A technical notice on EU citizens in the UK was expected as part of the no-deal preparations. That was confirmed in a recent technical notice from the Department for Transport, but it has not yet been produced and the Prime Minister’s spokesman apparently told journalists on Tuesday that there were no more notices in the pipeline. Will the Secretary of State clarify which is correct? If there is to be a notice, will he tell us when it will be published?

Dominic Raab: Most hon. Members would agree that citizens’ rights are an issue of scale, importance and sensitivity, which means that it will be dealt with not in technical notices, but in a different format. However, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that all the details will be coming along shortly to provide the assurances that I think both sides of the House want to give to EU nationals here. We value their contribution and want them to stay.

Paul Blomfield: Both sides of the House certainly do want those assurances, but I am unsure whether that answer provides them, so let me try with another issue. The Prime Minister said that, in the event of no deal, she will make a unilateral offer to EU citizens remaining in the UK, but the right to remain in itself does not provide the reassurance that they need. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that, in those circumstances, their rights will be identical in every respect to the provisions in the withdrawal agreement as currently drafted?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right that the Prime Minister made that commitment after the Salzburg summit. We are going to set out all the details in due course, but I can give him some reassurance right now, because the healthcare Bill, which is due to be introduced shortly, will provide reassurance, for example, in the context of reciprocal healthcare for UK nationals who live in, work in or visit the EU, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait just a bit longer for all the details.

Customs Arrangements

11. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiations for customs arrangements with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [907260]

15. Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiations for customs arrangements with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [907273]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): I have regular discussions in Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister, on all aspects of our future economic partnership with the EU, which of course includes the customs arrangements.

Nick Smith: How is the Secretary of State going to persuade the hardliners on the Conservative Benches behind him about the benefits of a customs union for jobs and for defending the United Kingdom?

Dominic Raab: We made a clear commitment that we will be leaving the customs union, so I do not think it is a question in the way the hon. Gentleman has described. Our White Paper proposals are designed to secure frictionless trade at the border, which is important for all businesses, particularly the UK’s just-in-time manufacturers.

Ian Murray: Will the Secretary of State tell us what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland about the incompatible arguments that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland can have different customs and trading arrangements but have no border, but Scotland and England would require a border if Scotland were independent? Is the Brexit that the Government are pursuing not just giving more succour to the nationalists?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. I have regular discussions with all my Cabinet colleagues, and we are clear that we will not allow any proposals to be accepted by the EU that would threaten the territorial, constitutional or economic integrity of the United Kingdom, and that means the whole of the United Kingdom.

21. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the subject of the long-term customs relationship between the EU and the UK, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his EU counterparts?

Dominic Raab: We have regular discussions with our EU counterparts about all aspects of the relationship, and we are making good progress. Of course, I cannot give the full details or provide the reassurance that my hon. Friend and others would want until we have the full deal, because there is no deal until we have the whole deal.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The withdrawal agreement makes provision to bind us into paying an exit payment of £39 billion. What provisions are there to ensure that the future trade agreement, which will only be in the form of a political statement, will actually get delivered and that we will not find ourselves paying the £39 billion without locking in the future trade arrangements in return?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know that he and other hon. Members are concerned about that. We need a package in place that not only deals with the separation issues and the money in the way that he described, but has a clear path and a clear commitment to put the future relationship into effect.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It has been reported that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit and chaos at the Channel ports, the Government will need to charter additional vessels to bring in food and medicine. What is the assessment of cost for both the Government and industry? What capacity is there in alternative ports to do that?
Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Of course, any blockage at the border ought to be addressed with pragmatism on both sides to alleviate it, but we must ensure that we are in a position, regardless of what the EU, the French or any other EU member state does, to weather any short-term disruption. We will ensure not only that we have the money and investment in place, but that we are co-operating with businesses and port authorities not just in the UK, but in Belgium, the Netherlands and other parts of the EU.

Fishermen

12. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for fishermen after the UK leaves the EU.

Suella Braverman: As I said, we fully expect to be negotiating as an independent coastal state in 2020. Any of the options put forward will take account of all that has been agreed in the draft withdrawal agreement. We have clarified that the UK share of quotas will not change during the implementation period and that the UK can attend international negotiations. I am sure my hon. Friend is aware of the structures that have been agreed to ensure that the UK has a representative voice in those negotiations.

Support for Businesses

13. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses to prepare for the UK leaving the EU.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With the Fisheries Bill being presented later this morning, and with the Lowestoft fishing industry coming forward with exciting plans to regenerate the industry, will the Minister reconfirm that in December 2020 the UK will negotiate fishing opportunities for 2021 as an independent coastal state?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for fishermen after we leave the European Union. The Fisheries Bill, introduced today, will allow us, for the first time since 1973, to take back control of our waters, set our own fisheries rules and exclusively determine who fishes what in our seas as an independent coastal state. That will ensure a sustainable and profitable fishing industry that will regenerate coastal communities and support future generations of UK fishermen.

Sir David Amess: Sea fishermen and cocklers are greatly looking forward to our leaving the European Union at 11 o’clock on 29 March 2019, but will my hon. Friend reassure them that their expected increase in living standards will not be damaged by any extension to the transition period?

Suella Braverman: I fully recognise the importance to fishing communities in Leigh-on-Sea of leaving the common fisheries policy, and my hon. Friend is a strong voice for those communities. We fully expect to negotiate as an independent coastal state in 2020 and, as the Prime Minister set out earlier this week, the interests of UK fishermen are at the forefront of our thinking as we consider the different options that have been proposed. What is clear is that, when EU rules no longer apply, the UK will be making its own decisions as an independent coastal state in 2020. What is clear is that, when EU rules no longer apply, the UK will be making its own decisions. We will control access to our own waters and we will seek to gain a fairer share of quotas.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and with the Scottish Government about replacing the European maritime and fisheries fund and devolving the equivalent budgets?

Suella Braverman: All European maritime and fisheries fund projects approved before the UK leaves the EU will be fully funded under the Treasury guarantee, even when those projects are not completed by the UK exit date. Work is under way to consider the long-term future of all the programmes that are currently EU funded. Leaving the EU means that we will want to take our own decisions about how to deliver the policy objectives previously supported by EU funding.

Justin Madders: Businesses in my constituency are reporting having to pay six-figure sums for Brexit contingency planning. How much of that will they be able to claim back from Government?

Mr Walker: It is vital that both the Government and businesses work together on contingency planning, which is why the Government have published the 106 technical notices. We will continue to work closely with businesses to ensure that they can bring their contingency plans up to form. We will also continue to work on a deal that means those contingency plans do not have to be put into force.

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister elaborate on an earlier answer? The continued success of Nissan is really important to my region. What specific action is he taking to support the manufacturing businesses that operate in the supply chain that supports the Nissan car factory?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the huge importance of our automotive sector. We continue to engage with the automotive sector, both with the big companies and organisations such as the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, and with the supply chain to ensure that we are taking their views on board. Securing frictionless access to the
European market is so important to protecting those supply chains, which of course exist both in the UK and in Europe.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham in my constituency, measured by tonnage, is the largest in the UK. When I meet businesses on the port, they constantly tell me about the opportunities they foresee for Brexit to extend trade through the port. Will the Minister, and the Government as a whole, support them by talking more about the opportunities of Brexit, rather than talking down those opportunities as the Opposition do?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are huge global opportunities for the UK as a global trading nation, and ports such as those in his constituency will thrive as the UK pursues global free trade.

Mr Speaker: In the spirit of helpfulness to new Members, may I gently say to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), whom I know wished to come in on the previous question, that with modest guile it would be perfectly possible for him legitimately to shoehorn his inquiry into the current question?

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As has been said, the Fisheries Bill is to be introduced today. So does my hon. Friend find it as strange as I do that the Scottish National party is leading a delegation to Brussels today to advocate not only staying in the single market and customs union, but, presumably, the common fisheries policy, as well as all the other institutions of the EU in which it is the SNP’s policy to remain? Can she confirm that it is this Government’s position to stay in none of those institutions?

Mr Speaker: It is now a he, rather than a she, but the thrust of the inquiry stands.

Mr Walker: We are grateful, Mr Speaker. I can absolutely confirm that it is our Government’s position to leave the CFP. Having met the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation and the Scottish Seafood Association to discuss these issues, I think they would be as shocked at the SNP’s position on this as my hon. Friend is.

Second EU Referendum

14. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What the Government’s policy is on holding a second referendum on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): After sustained public debate, a clear majority of the electorate voted to leave the EU in June 2016, with the highest number of votes cast for anything in UK electoral history. We must respect both the will of the British people and the democratic process that delivered that result. As such, it is a matter of Government policy that there will not be a second referendum on our exit from the EU.

John Lamont: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. As someone who voted remain in that referendum, I was naturally disappointed by the result. But I am also a democrat, and it is important that we all respect the results of all elections, regardless of whether we win or lose them. Putting aside the questions on the so-called “people’s vote” and what it would actually achieve and deliver, does she not agree that it would undermine fundamental principles of democracy in this country?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes his point skilfully. People trusted that their voices would be heard, and to ask the question all over again would be a betrayal of our democracy and of that trust. Whether on Brexit or on Scottish independence, politicians north and south of the border should think twice before they choose to let people down in this way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps the Government have taken to co-operate with other EU states on those countries’ preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

Mr Speaker: I should say to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) that I was speaking at a theatre in Colchester last night and I referenced him in the course of my remarks. Knowing that he is not altogether averse to a focus upon himself from time to time, I think he would have enjoyed my observations.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, if the 2016 referendum is not honoured, a second referendum would have no credibility whatsoever?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is not the best of three. It is not about, “You keep trying until you get the result you want.” This was a historic vote, when millions of people put their faith in democracy. To do anything other than revere that vote would undermine democracy and cause a collapse in that faith.

Mr Speaker: I am relieved to see that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is a most assiduous attender in the Chamber, has beetled into the Chamber just in time. This is very good news.

No Deal: Other States’ Preparations

16. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to co-operate with other EU states on those countries’ preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): We are committed to negotiating a successful exit and, as a responsible Government, we are also preparing for the unlikely scenario in which we leave without a deal, including by co-operating with member states to minimise disruption to citizens and businesses. We will continue to impress on member states our joint responsibility to work together.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker.

Although we do not expect a no-deal scenario, which is clearly not in the interests of anyone, does the Minister agree that it is completely incumbent on EU member states to work with the UK, because it is in their own interests to get a good deal as well?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Member states are playing a key role in ensuring the successful delivery of our exit and in negotiations. We hope to work with them fully in future.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Have the discussions with the Republic of Ireland Government about the possibility of our leaving with no deal next March identified that they would have a clear obligation, enforceable quite quickly through the European Court of Justice, to impose customs and other checks on trade across the border with Northern Ireland?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think the right hon. Gentleman will find that the Irish Government have said that they would not do that.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): In the event of no deal, the EU’s free trade agreements will cease to apply to the UK. How many of those 37 free trade agreements have the Government successfully agreed with our partners to retain and carry over in the event of no deal?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are currently in negotiations with all those individual partners so that we can do exactly that.

Leaving the EU: Devolved Administrations

17. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with the devolved Administrations on the negotiations for the UK leaving the EU. [907276]

Mr Walker: I am clear that the Government’s position is that we will leave the single market and customs union, but I did receive a delightful bound copy of said report at the ministerial forum and will of course take it away and give it due consideration.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Yesterday, the Russian Federation formally objected to the post-Brexit schedule proposed by the UK at the World Trade Organisation. Unless the Russian veto is removed, if there is no deal, Welsh companies will not be able to trade on WTO terms. What discussions has the Minister had with the Welsh Government about this catastrophic likely outcome for the Welsh economy?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman refers to something that happened yesterday. I understand that the Department for International Trade has already responded and said that such objections at the WTO are not unusual and that it is already taking steps to address them.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Minister knows that I am the vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, of which he is a much-missed member. The assembly recently visited the Scottish Parliament, where we were shown the recent report. I have recently been to Wales and BIPA has just had its conference in London. The Minister greatly respects the United Kingdom and its constituent parts, but may I pick up on what the Secretary of State said? It is not good enough to keep on talking to Cabinet colleagues; Brexit is undermining the integrity of the Union. How often has the Secretary of State visited the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland to talk to the people there about how they really feel about the strain in our constitution?

Mr Walker: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her important work with BIPA, of which I was a keen member as a Back Bencher. We take the Union very seriously. The Secretary of State regularly meets representatives of the two devolved Governments and the Northern Ireland civil service at the Joint Ministerial Committee. Although he is relatively new in his role, I am sure that he will visit all four parts of the United Kingdom during the course of his duties.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running slightly late, but I want to accommodate the last two questioners.

Leaving the EU: Legislation

18. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the volume of legislation that would be required in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [907277]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): We are continuing to put in place the legislative building blocks to deliver our exit, whatever the outcome of the negotiations, including the unlikely event that a deal cannot be agreed. The Government have stated consistently that a wide range of legislation will be required to correct retained EU law and ensure a functioning statute book on exit day.
Examples include the recent Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, which is now law, and statutory instruments on civil aviation and airports.

Afzal Khan: Greater Manchester has started to draw up plans for the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit. Council leaders have warned that supermarkets in the north-west do not have warehouse space to stockpile food. Planes from Manchester airport could be grounded. Councils have already faced eight years of austerity, and they will be the ones picking up the pieces after no deal, providing housing and children-and-adult services to people who are out of work because of economic downturn. Will the Minister commit to sharing the Government’s no-deal planning with local authorities?

Suella Braverman: The Government take very seriously the concerns of local authorities when it comes to Brexit preparations. I have met local government leaders all over the country to talk about the subject. I am glad that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has set up a Brexit delivery board to co-ordinate the work of local authorities and Government on preparations for Brexit—deal or no deal.

**Aerospace Sector**

19. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support SMEs in the aerospace sector to prepare for the potential effect on that industry’s cash flow of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We firmly believe that it is in the interests of both the EU and the UK to strike a deal, but it is the job of a responsible Government to prepare for all scenarios. The UK aerospace industry is a high-growth, high-value sector driven by innovation. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working with the sector to ensure that the UK continues to be one of the most competitive locations in the world for aerospace.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for that answer. No deal would be extremely serious and damaging for aerospace both in the EU and the UK, so it is vital that we avoid that. In terms of cash flow, I ask him, even if there is a deal, to look very seriously at ensuring that cash flow is available for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that are likely to be impacted even by small disruption to their business.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his supplementary question. Although there are programmes already in place, including the Sharing in Growth performance improvement programme, I will happily take away the point that he has made and perhaps have a conversation with him about it later.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907283] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): Since I last updated the House, our negotiations with the EU have continued and the withdrawal agreement is now 95% agreed. There is one key outstanding issue, namely the Northern Ireland border. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister set out the proposals that we are discussing with the EU and, as we intensify our negotiations to secure a good deal, we are also expediting preparations for no deal just in case the EU does not match the ambition and the pragmatism that we have demonstrated.

Marsha De Cordova: It is clear that no deal would be a national disaster and the thousands of EU citizens living in Battersea fear that a no-deal Brexit risks causing personal disaster and their rights to be jeopardised. Groups such as the 3 million have called for the citizens’ rights section of the withdrawal agreement to be ring-fenced so that there is no change to their rights in the event of a no deal. Why will the Secretary of State not make that commitment?

Dominic Raab: The Prime Minister and I have made the commitment to secure the rights of EU nationals here. We will set out the details very shortly, and we do expect the EU to reciprocate in relation to UK expats abroad.

T2. [907284] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): No deal will be damaging for both sides, so does my right hon. Friend agree that, in effect, to rule out supporting any agreement that the Prime Minister agrees with 27 other EU states on the basis of contrived tests puts politics before principle and does not serve the national interest?

Dominic Raab: It is a deeply irresponsible approach. I have to say that it is one that the Labour leadership have taken, but it is one that all Members on all sides might have to think about very carefully when we bring back a good deal from the EU.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The Secretary of State has now published 106 technical notices relating to no deal. The analysis by the Institute for Government shows that, taken together, his own technical notices commit the Government before next March to the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements either with the EU or other countries, and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is a huge legislative task for any Government, let alone this troubled Government. That is his own analysis. On a scale of one to 10, can the Secretary of State indicate how confident he is that this can all be done in the next 22 weeks?

Dominic Raab: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary. What he has set out, of course, is the concerted plans and preparations that we are rightly undertaking to make sure that, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations—and we want a good deal—we will be ready to deal with the short-term risk, which there will undoubtedly be, and make a success of Brexit.

Keir Starmer: I notice that I did not get a number between one and 10, and I notice, therefore, that the Secretary of State is not adopting the blind confidence in the face of the fact that his predecessor went in for.
The truth is that it is already too late to plan for no deal. This is bluff not planning. May I ask a very simple question? Why was this legislation not introduced months ago?

**Dominic Raab:** There has actually been a variety of legislation, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which is now in place. The irresponsible thing to do is take the position of the shadow Chancellor, who has said that he would make no financial provision for no deal. That is deeply irresponsible, as it would leave us as a hostage to the negotiations and leave the UK overexposed in the unlikely and regrettable outcome that we do not get a deal with our EU partners.

**T4. [907288] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** Torbay’s language colleges are delighted to welcome thousands of students from across Europe each year to enjoy the beautiful bay and to learn English. Will the Minister outline how the needs of that sector have been considered in our negotiations with the EU?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** Studying abroad is a great opportunity for many students and we want to ensure that it continues. We have proposed a UK-EU co-operative accord on culture and education for after we leave, allowing British and EU students to continue to visit one another’s countries, and study in one another’s colleges and universities.

**T3. [907286] Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab):** A number of my constituents—from musicians to those in financial services—regularly travel to Europe for work, and they are worried and anxious about how the arrangements after Brexit will affect their lives and work. Will the Minister assure my constituents that plans for travel will cause no or minimal disruption to their work, and can he tell the House when the plans will be made available for scrutiny?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. In our White Paper, we have set out a labour mobility framework that includes visa-free travel for tourists and short-term business visits. I think that that would address her constituents’ points.

**Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con):** Will the Government ensure that our contingency plans reflect what we know of our European partners’ contingency plans?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris):** I thank my hon. Friend for his work on no deal when he was the Minister, and the preparations that have been in place for more than two years. As he will know from his experience in the Department, we closely monitor what our European counterparts are saying. If he were to listen to our French counterparts at this point in time, he would be hearing noises about two-minute checks at the border, not longer. France is employing lots of customs guards to ensure the flow of goods and trade, and will increase the number of border posts at Calais.

**T5. [907289] Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab):** To mitigate any possible loss of trade following Brexit, will the Secretary of State lobby Cabinet colleagues to develop the green economy? An increased domestic demand for items such as electric vehicles that are manufactured in the north-east will help to boost jobs and develop the green economy.

**Dominic Raab:** Through our White Paper proposals, we are absolutely committed not just to secure and build on our brilliant trading relationship with the EU, but to take advantage of the growth opportunities globally. We are also committed—not just through the EU withdrawal Act, but through the legislation that will be coming forward—to ensuring that we leave the country in an environmentally stronger position for the next generation.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** If anyone were to cut up rough at the borders, what is the significance of our being a signatory to the World Trade Organisation trade facilitation agreement?

**Dominic Raab:** The WTO rules provide some legal checks in relation to discrimination and other aspects, but the reality is that there would be disruption at the border. We can mitigate to a large degree, but not wholly; that will depend on the response from our EU partners and friends. The French, the Belgians and the Dutch are co-operating with us constructively with regard to Eurotunnel. My hon. Friend will have heard what the Minister for no deal planning said about the French approach. We are confident that there would be a constructive approach on both sides in the case of a no-deal scenario, but we do need to prepare for all eventualities.

**T6. [907290] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab):** Will the protocol and memorandum of understanding for Gibraltar still stand in the event of no deal?

**Mr Robin Walker:** It has always been the case in these negotiations that we have to agree the whole deal in order for it to apply. It is right to say that we have made a great deal of progress on that protocol, but it is linked to the overall withdrawal agreement.

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** Witnesses to the Select Committee on Justice on Tuesday stressed the importance of ongoing contractual continuity and certainty of enforcement. That is especially important to the financial services sector, where many of my constituents work. Will the Minister meet me to discuss progress on a number of the important technical aspects around this issue?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will remember that I answered questions on this topic before his Committee when I was a Justice Minister. These are key aspects of the future relationship, and aspects that we continue to negotiate. We will continue to engage with him and his Committee to ensure that we get the right approach.

**T7. [907291] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** Today we learnt that Nigel Farage could be in line for a £150,000 pay-off when we leave the EU. Our Future. Our Choice has produced a report analysing the impact of Brexit on young people, revealing that those aged 18 to 29 could lose £76,000 in earnings by 2050—or even more in a worst-case scenario. With young
people hit hardest by a bad deal, will the Secretary of State agree to meet Our Future, Our Choice to discuss its findings?

**Dominic Raab:** Any pay-offs to MEPs are obviously a matter for the EU rather than the UK. In relation to young people, we need to be very clear on the benefits of Brexit, both in relation to trade and to the global horizons that will be the USP of this country. In relation to the mobility provisions that allow them to keep studying, travelling and taking advantage of the rich cultural and educational opportunities on the continent, we will engage with all sectors and all stakeholders.

**Jersey Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Yesterday, at our evidence session in the Exiting the EU Committee, representatives of Northern Irish businesses made it quite clear that no deal would be really damaging for them and for the people of Northern Ireland. Does that not therefore make it absolutely imperative that the whole question of the Northern Ireland backstop is resolved, and resolved quickly?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend is always a very constructive commentator on these issues, and I welcomed my time serving with him on the Brexit Committee. He makes a very important point. We want to see a sensible approach to the bridge between intellectual property and the future relationship; the de-politicisation, frankly, of this issue; and making sure, which is in both sides' interests, that we resolve this issue and get the deal done, which is good news for both sides, and particularly for Northern Ireland.

**T8. [907292] Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We now know that the Government are drawing up plans to charter ships to import emergency food and medicines in the event of a no-deal scenario. So what level of lunacy is required before the Government actually wake up to the right solution, which is staying in the EU, the single market and the customs union?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Stockpiling is a part of what the NHS and businesses do already. We will be leaving the European Union successfully on 29 March next year, and we will be getting a deal.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK has the world's third-largest aviation industry, yet there are no WTO defaults in the event of no deal. What discussions are taking place to help the aviation industry to plan for all Brexit scenarios?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman):** My hon. Friend raises an important issue. He will have seen, no doubt, the technical notices that have been issued relating to the aviation sector, which set out very clearly that we would seek to strike the relevant bilateral agreements to ensure that aviation companies and aeroplanes have access to each other's airspace.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): We hear a lot of fighting talk from the Front Bench, but what attempt are the Government making to heal the terrible divisions that still scar our country, and what attempt are they making to listen to the concerns of remain voters such as mine in Bristol West?

**Dominic Raab:** It has nothing to do with fighting talk; it is to do with the professionalism and the smart approach we are taking to the negotiations, both on the substance and the detail of our proposals. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is laughing, but Labour has come up with no serious alternative on the substance. We will continue to make sure that we get the best deal for the country, because that would provide the unifying effect and the healing of the divisions that the hon. Lady refers to.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): When I came back from Berlin during the October holidays, I went through the blue lane rather than the red lane or the green lane at customs. What lane will I use on 30 March next year, on 30 March 2020, and on 30 March 2021?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The hon. Gentleman can come back through the UK lane.

**Mr Speaker:** I hope that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) is now clear about his domestic arrangements for the future. No doubt we will get an update in due course.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Bed manufacturing contributes over £330 million to the UK economy, employing 7,000 people in over 155 companies. In Batley and Spen alone, there are 35 bed manufacturers employing over 1,000 staff. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with bed manufacturers to protect them from a no-deal Brexit?

**Dominic Raab:** We engage with all sectors and businesses of all kinds, both through the business advisory group, which I have gone and presented to, and the CBI's business committee. We want to make sure that manufacturers like those in the hon. Lady's constituency, who have been protected in a no-deal scenario in relation to their medicines in the event of a no-deal scenario. So what conversations has the Secretary of State had with bed manufacturers to protect them from a no-deal Brexit?

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** There are two colleagues bobbing who have not had a question so far. I call Martin Whitfield.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker.

On this sitting day in 1971, by 356 votes to 244, this House voted to join the EEC. Could the Secretary of State give us the benefits of that decision?

**Dominic Raab:** I am not quite sure of the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to raise, but I gently suggest to him that life has moved on a little bit since the 1970s, although some on the Labour Front Bench are a bit slow in catching up. We had a referendum in 1975, the British people voted to leave and we are going to get the best deal for them.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): This morning, a family-owned business in my constituency, FreestyleXtreme, announced that it is moving some of its jobs to Bucharest because of uncertainty about Brexit, and particularly the fact that it might be hit by....
tariffs after exit day. It warned me several months ago that that move would have to be on the cards. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to small companies? I can see further businesses taking the same option if they do not get more clarity.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to point to the uncertainty at this moment in time. The best way of alleviating that is for us to get a good deal. The economy is doing well. Youth unemployment is half the level it was in 2010. Wages are rising at the highest level since the financial crash. In terms of businesses voting with confidence in the UK economy, Rolls-Royce, Unilever and Amazon recently announced fresh investment in this country, and that is the reason we should go into these negotiations with economic self-confidence.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but we must now move on.

Before we hear the urgent question, I wish to make a short statement about the recording of names in the Division list printed in *Hansard* relating to new clause 7, in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill.

I am sorry to report that there are a large number of errors in that list. Those appear to have been caused by a technological failure. The numbers recorded as voting on either side of the Division are recorded by the Tellers. Those numbers—I hope the House is following me—are correct. Moreover, the names recorded on the Commons voting app—with which all present, I feel sure, will be closely familiar—are also correct. Urgent steps are now being taken to correct the record, and the Clerk Assistant is investigating what went wrong, with a view to taking necessary corrective action. He has asked me to pass on his apology to Members concerned. I cannot identify them individually—that would be a most burdensome and lengthy task—but I hope that they will take this as an apology to all. A revised, corrected list will be printed. I hope that that satisfies the House for now.

Mr Sheerman: It could be the Russians.

Mr Speaker: I am always grateful for the assistance proffered from a sedentary position by the hon. Gentleman.
Nuclear Treaty: US Withdrawal

10.37 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned US withdrawal from the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty and its implications for UK and European security.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will have to put up with the Minister of State this morning.

If I may, I will first set out some of the context. The intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty is an agreement signed 31 years ago, in 1987, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with intermediate ranges. For over three decades, the INF treaty has played a valuable role in supporting Euro-Atlantic security. By removing an entire class of US and Russian weapons, the treaty has contributed to strategic stability and reduced the risk of miscalculation leading to conflict.

Russia’s aggressive actions, including the threat and use of force to attain political goals, continue to undermine Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order. Full compliance is essential for the treaty to be effective, yet a pattern of behaviour and information over many years has led to widespread doubts about Russia’s compliance. Of course, it was the Obama Administration in 2014 that first strongly called out Russia’s non-compliance with this treaty. It is important to remember that this has been a long-running concern for several US Administrations and, indeed, for their European allies.

Alone in NATO allies in July, we made clear that in the absence of any credible answer from Russia on the 9M729 missile, the most plausible assessment would be that Russia was now in violation of the INF treaty. Since then, we have received no credible answer and so judge that Russia is indeed in violation.

In the interests of preserving the treaty, to which we in the UK and I think all our allies in Europe remain fully committed, we urge Russia to address these concerns in a substantial and transparent way, and to come back into full compliance with the treaty. The situation in which only one side—the United States—adheres to the treaty and Russia remains in non-compliance is not sustainable, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree.

It is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from this treaty. While the treaty remains in force, we shall continue to support it, and in particular to press Russia to return to full and verifiable compliance. Indeed, it is worth noting media reports that Presidents Trump and Putin plan to meet in France next month—on Remembrance Sunday—to discuss this further. May I reassure the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the House at large, that dialogue is ongoing and that we shall remain in close contact with our US and NATO allies?

Fabian Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Minister for a very helpful reply.

As the Minister said, last week President Trump announced that the United States intends to leave the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty, which was signed by the US and Soviet Russia in 1987. At that time, the threat of nuclear war brought the two great powers together at the negotiation table. The result of those negotiations was the elimination of all short and intermediate-range nuclear missiles, many of which were placed in Europe. Worryingly, however, nuclear war seems more tangible and real today than at any time since Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF. Yet instead of realising this very real threat and its implications for global peace and security, the United States has apparently decided unilaterally to pull out, offering no alternative proposal or replacement. That is why I very much welcome the Minister’s comments.

What we are seeing at the moment is the erosion of the rules-based international order that underpins global peace and security. I must point out that the US was at the forefront of painstakingly creating such a system over the past 70 years. Leaving the INF is a dangerous unravelling of part of the architecture of trust and understanding that has prevented nuclear conflict. That system began exactly 50 years ago with the signing of the non-proliferation treaty, and certainly Labour Members—and, I am sure, those on both sides of the House—strongly support it.

Many experts have concluded that we are now entering a new arms race that has the potential to be more unpredictable and dangerous than at any time during the cold war. Have the UK Government consulted the United States on the implications that an arms race might have for European and United Kingdom security? I ask this because this has deep implications for European security. In 1987, Europe was at the epicentre of the cold war and the arms race between Russia and America. Today, events in places such as Ukraine, and even here at home in Salisbury, have shown that Europe is at the forefront of a new conflict between east and west.

Withdrawal from the INF brings back the spectre of Pershing missiles being stationed in Europe and here in the United Kingdom, which I remember vividly from the 1980s. If such a nuclear conflict was to happen between the two major nuclear powers, the UK and our European allies would probably be the first to be hit. Finally, have the Government been given assurances by the United States Administration that we will not see a return of the deployment of short and intermediate-range missiles in Europe?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I know that he and I agree—I hope the whole House would agree—that there is a great worry that there seems to be an erosion of the international rules-based order on which we have relied since the second world war. I think that we all recognise that that order perhaps needs to evolve and adapt to the world we are living in, and we need to engage with as many partners as possible to ensure that that comes to pass.

We have long-standing concerns about Russia’s development of a range of new capabilities that stand ready to undermine strategic stability. The US is a responsible nuclear power, with which we will continue to work closely, and we have twice been to the UN Security Council in the past year for the debates that have taken place on non-proliferation. Interestingly, those debates were held at
the behest of Kazakhstan and other nations that one would not necessarily think of as being immediately concerned about such matters. It is very much the policy to reduce the number of nuclear weapons. We shall continue to work with all partners across the international community to prevent proliferation and to make progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament.

I wish to touch on one other matter that the hon. Gentleman did not mention but is worth commenting on. As he is aware, there is also the bilateral new strategic arms reduction treaty. It was signed in 2011 by the US and Russia, and is designed to expire, under a 10-year process, in 2021. We are very pleased that both sides met limits by the deadline earlier this year, and we welcome the continued implementation of that treaty, which has an important impact on the broader proliferation of nuclear and other weaponry. New START contributes to international stability, and allies have expressed strong support for its continued implementation, and for early and active dialogue on ways to improve strategic stability.

Mark Field: My hon. Friend was alive during the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when the world came to the brink of nuclear war. Clearly the most important issue is that both sides have to come to compliance. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Russia needs to come to compliance with its obligations under the treaty to make the world safe?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his wise comments. It is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from the treaty, and clearly we are in discussions with our allies to avoid that outcome, but it is equally important that it returns to full and verifiable compliance. It is also worth reflecting, as I did in my comments about New START, on the fact that there are other treaties around. I accept that this issue very much focuses the minds of all of us on the European continent, but other treaties are still being adhered to, and that is a positive starting point in trying to bring both sides together.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is my understanding that it would take six months to withdraw from the treaty under the formal process. Is it effectively the case that we now have a crucial six-month period in which to make some progress in reaching an agreement between Russia, America and ourselves?

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that we engage routinely with the US on a wide range of foreign policy and security issues, and similarly, this week US officials in Moscow will be talking about a range of issues. There is a timeframe, as my hon. Friend rightly points out. We very much want to adhere to the treaty while it is in place, and in our view it is Russia’s responsibility to come to the table and ensure the proper implementation of its obligations.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): President Trump’s decision to withdraw unilaterally from hard-won international agreements, including the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal, is cause for concern. I agree with the Minister that states need to honour the commitments they have entered into, but does he agree that it sends a damaging message about the need for international agreements to solve the problems of the world when the United States of America can no longer be relied on to uphold agreements that it freely entered into?

Mark Field: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government also have concerns about the Paris climate change agreement, and we think it greatly to be regretted that the US decided to withdraw from it. I reiterate that it is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from this treaty, and it is the work of allies—particularly here on the European continent, and not least the big three of the United Kingdom, Germany and France—to try to exert as much pressure as possible in that regard. The easiest way to resolve this matter is to ensure that the bilateral arrangement that has been in place for 31 years is adhered to by one of the parties that is not doing so. In a way, this is frustration boiling over, and as I have pointed out, this is not something new to the Trump Administration; this high-profile issue goes back almost half a decade, including during the Obama Administration.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Minister agrees that none of us wants a return to the era of thousands of short and intermediate-range nuclear warhead missile delivery systems in Europe that could potentially be used at a moment’s notice to start a world war. Does he agree that when Russia has developed a new missile system that is potentially in breach of this treaty, we must be clear that that treaty will not survive if one party ignores its obligations?
Mark Field: My hon. Friend is right and there are very deep-seated concerns, not only for the US but for all allies about the Russia’s development of new missile systems. Those long-standing concerns are shared by all NATO allies, not least those close to the Russian border. Along with NATO allies, and supported by US efforts, we worked to bring Russia back into compliance as recently as the NATO summit last July.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One disturbing thing that President Trump added to this conversation was when he said that he is not convinced by the treaty because it does not include China, which is increasing its arsenal. Does that suggest that something in the mind of the President of the United States of America would quite like an escalation of nuclear weaponry? That is something to be abhorred by us all, is it not?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that that is, in part, in the realms of speculation. As Members will know, Russia and the US alone are the countries bound by the treaty, although it obviously impacts on many other countries across the world, especially in Europe. We are engaging, and will continue to engage, with the United States Administration to understand their assessment, although obviously, I, too, have read some of the speculation to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Fundamentally, this treaty concerns Euro-Atlantic security and can be effective only if there is full compliance.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm what specific engagement there has been with representatives from the US Administration and Russian authorities on these matters?

Mark Field: I hope my hon. Friend will recognise that I do not want to get into too many matters of sensitive intelligence regarding verification and other issues. Clearly, lines of communications are open, and not just with the US. One benefit, however frustrating, of the bilateral relationship between the UK and Russia is that we are members of the UN Security Council, and there are opportunities to engage on a regular basis. My hope is that the Labour Front Bencher was slightly more even-handed in his approach to the matter than he gives him credit for. It is, however, worth reiterating my hon. Friend’s point that ultimately we would not have come to this pass had Russia adhered to its compliance obligations.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Just to be clear, if the INF treaty falls apart that would mean the relocation of short-range and medium-range nuclear missiles on UK soil. The UK Government have not been critical of President Trump’s diplomatic moves, so can I take it that they would not stand in the way of the relocation of those missiles on UK soil?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that that is highly speculative and several steps ahead. We are doing our level best to ensure that, for the reasons I have laid out, the INF treaty is not torn up and thrown away. For as long as the treaty remains in force, we shall continue our efforts to bring Russia back into full and verified compliance.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend referred to the ongoing work on multilateral nuclear disarmament. Will he express what the United Kingdom is doing? It is absolutely vital that far more visible work is done on this globally, in addition to seeking to maintain the other treaties that are a vital stepping stone towards that?

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that a lot of work does go on. It is often said that the best way to keep matters secret in British public life is to say something about them on the Floor of the House of Commons. Perhaps the floor of the UN Security Council provides the same anonymity. Whenever I go to New York, I am very struck by how many nations, particularly those who are non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, feel as strongly about non-proliferation. We continue to work very closely on it. With all the issues around Democratic People’s Republic of Korea that have been at the forefront of people’s minds over the past year, there has never been a more important time to make the robust case to which he refers.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Russia’s non-compliance with the treaty is very serious, but may I press the Minister on what assurances, with regard to the deployment of short-range and medium-range missiles in Europe, he has gleaned from our US partners?
Mark Field: That is a fair question to ask, but the hon. Gentleman will realise that this is sheer speculation. We are a long way off the idea of having to take assurances about where the siting of any weapons may or may not be. Obviously, one of our biggest concerns is that President Putin’s immediate instinct is to come out and make a rather destabilising and uncalled for comment about a further threat in this regard. Our hope is that both parties will return to the table to look at the treaty, but that would require good will, particularly on the Russian side.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK has a long and strong interest in this treaty, thanks in no small part to Margaret Thatcher bringing the two sides together. Tempting as it is for some in this place to enter into a little bit of America bashing, will the Minister confirm that it is Russia, not the US, that is in breach of the treaty?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for robustly putting that case. He is absolutely right; the whole issue has come to pass because of Russia’s continued and long-standing non-compliance. The truth of the matter is, as I have said, that this is not just an issue for the Trump Administration. Very robust action was taken in 2014 and grave concerns were raised about Russia’s failure to adhere to its obligations.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will recall that yesterday was the anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in 1945. In 1945, some real statesmen and women got together and said, “How do we stop these world wars? How do we stop this chaos? How do we stop the killing?” They came up with the United Nations, NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community, which became the European Union. Is it not a fact that we now have to realise what perilous times we are in and find unity in Europe to make a contribution to the peace?

Mark Field: Understandably, we often take the situation for granted. I am the father of a 10-year-old son, and we have perhaps taken for granted the fact that he is the third generation of Field menfolk who have not had to go to war. We should be aware that that is the exception, rather than the rule.

I am a great believer in utilising the strongest possible bilateral and multilateral communications, in diplomacy terms. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that one thing has been very evident in all the discussions since that fateful day in June 2016: when we leave the European Union, we have to work together in security, defence and intelligence. We have focused our minds on that great deal, and we will continue to do so even when we are outside the European Union.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As recently as this summer, Jon Huntsman, the US ambassador to Russia, described the INF as “probably the most successful treaty” in the “history of arms control”. Does the Minister agree with Jon Huntsman, and, if so, will he make that point to the US and Russian Governments as he meets them?

Mark Field: It is fair to say that although that treaty has particular resonance in Europe, a number of other treaties have come into place since then. There has been a new strategic arms reduction treaty, and constant discussions are taking place to try to secure non-proliferation. The treaty is clearly important in its own terms, but it is a treaty signed between two countries. We would like one of those two countries, which is clearly in breach of it, to come back to the table. Only when that happens can we be sure that the stability that came into place at the signing of the treaty 31 years ago will be maintained.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Regrettably, both Trump and Putin seem committed to tearing up the international rules-based order. What specific initiatives does the Minister anticipate the UK taking with the European Union to bolster the international rules-based order, so that we can ensure that there is a focus on reducing nuclear weapons, but also on tackling other global issues such as climate change?

Mark Field: It is wrong to suggest that America is trying to tear up the international order, although there are perhaps more threats to that order than has hitherto been the case. We will work together in as many international institutions as we can. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that Germany joins the Security Council in January next year for a two-year term, and we anticipate tremendously important work being done between France, Germany and the UK in that forum to try to hold things together.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The problem with the politics of brinkmanship is that it takes people to the brink. Is it not about time the Government used the so-called special relationship to tell President Trump so?

Mark Field: I do not want to reiterate what I have said for the last half hour, but the truth of the matter is that we have reached this point because Russia has persistently and consistently failed to meet its obligations. The important thing is not that we turn our fire in the other direction, but that we work with all our allies—we are united among our NATO allies here in Europe—to ensure that Russia adheres to those obligations.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you know that I am by nature a conviction optimist, but my optimism—and, more importantly, that of my constituents in Bristol West, who turned to me over the weekend for hope and reassurance about the international rules-based order—is being sorely tested. I ask the Minister from the heart: what help can he give me to pass on optimism and hope for a better world?

Mark Field: I am sure the hon. Lady will be glad to hear that I am by nature a glass-half-full person, but these are serious issues. We must continue to talk, and we must continue to make the case internationally, along the lines that she has suggested.

All our NATO allies are totally united on this issue. Their consistent message is that Russia has a key role in preserving the treaty, and it must be made aware of that key role, which we agree has been a very important pillar of the European security agreement. I say to the
hon. Lady, “Please do not be pessimistic.” This is one of the things about diplomacy. I know that a lot of it goes on under the radar, but we are working together with all our allies, in this particular space but also generally, where there are other breaches of the rules-based international system.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The INF treaty has been important across the NATO alliance in preventing miscalculation. Across the alliance there has also been concern about Russia’s failure to comply. Can the Minister confirm that advance notice of the American stance was given to the alliance, and that he will press for America to keep members of the alliance up to date and informed about its position in relation to any cancellation of the treaty?

Mark Field: I am happy to confirm that we will do that. I reiterate that the United States is still in the treaty, and we will continue to engage routinely with the widest range of foreign policy and security issues with the United States and, indeed, with other partners in this regard.

Speaker’s Statement

11.6 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the business question, I wish to make a few brief remarks.

I am delighted that the House of Commons Commission has decided to support fully the three main recommendations of Dame Laura Cox’s report, namely the removal of the previous complaints procedures that are considered not fit for purpose, the call for an entirely independent process to handle complaints, and the inclusion of historical allegations. I believe that this is an important first step in our root-and-branch reform of the culture of this House.

We need to create an internal movement that looks at everything and everyone, and ensures that we all treat each other with respect. We know that more than 200 people came forward to give their testimonies to help Dame Laura to form her opinions, and we owe it to each and every one of them to get this right. Specifically, I am very keen to see the establishment of an independent body to hear and adjudicate on all allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct as soon as possible. Knowing that there is a safe place—a haven—for staff and Members of Parliament to approach when things go badly wrong should send out the strongest signal yet that we are listening, we have heard, and we are willing to change.
Business of the House

11.7 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 29 OCTOBER—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of the Budget debate, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

FRIDAY 2 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 November will include the following:

MONDAY 5 NOVEMBER—A general debate on the Dame Laura Cox report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff, followed by a general debate on road safety.

TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER—A general debate on the centenary of the armistice.

May I start by sending the very best wishes of the House to Sir Jeremy Heywood, a man whose public service we have been so lucky and thankful to have?

Today we celebrate the coming into force 50 years ago of the Race Relations Act 1965, a critical piece of legislation that made the United Kingdom a better place in which to live and work. As Black History Month enters its final week, we acknowledge the extraordinary contribution to the United Kingdom that is made by all our black and minority ethnic communities. Finally, as we approach the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, may I draw all colleagues’ attention to the concert in Westminster Hall being performed by the Parliament choir and the Bundestag choir at 7.30 pm on 31 October? I plan to attend and hope that many colleagues will be able to join what I am sure will be a fantastic event.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business—although it is still only for a week and two days. At last week’s business questions the Leader of the House said I was complaining when I asked for the dates of the Easter recess, but I am going to try again as she has not announced them, and I do not think that is a very nice way of describing what I asked for—I was just doing my job. Maybe unconsciously the right hon. Lady is irritated by my questions, but this is business questions not business discussions. Members, staff and the House need the dates in order to plan ahead.

I note that there has been no rescheduling of time for the Offensive Weapons Bill. It is a very important Bill: it covers the sale and delivery of corrosive substances, possession of dangerous knives, possession of offensive weapons. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and other hon. Members have consistently asked the Government for action on this to protect the public. The last time the Bill was scheduled to be discussed the Government put it on three statements, and the next time there were two urgent questions and then a statement by the Prime Minister. When will we have the Report stage and Third Reading?

The right hon. Lady mentioned race relations and the anniversary of the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965—by a Labour Government. A point of order was raised yesterday by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). He said a person was welcomed for lunch on the parliamentary estate; at rallies this person’s supporters have been pictured performing Nazi salutes. Will the Leader of the House join me in opposing far-right extremists being invited on to the parliamentary estate? Does the Leader of the House know if he read the behaviour code?

Also last week I asked about the statutory instrument on managing migration on to universal credit, saying it should be taken on the Floor of the House. I have asked for this twice, and the right hon. Lady has not given me a yes or no answer. Can she just say, “Yes it will”? We know how to pray against it; we just need a confirmation and reassurance from her that we can debate it on the Floor of the House.

Again last week I asked about Northamptonshire County Council-owned NEA Properties. The Leader of the House again did not answer the question and say what happened to £1.5 million of public money spent on unspecified projects. Will she ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to update the House?

The Government seem to be profligate with public money and state assets, because apparently the UK equity firm Cerberus misled the Government in the biggest sale of state assets in UK history. The company told the Government it was planning to offer homeowners better mortgage deals before its £13 billion purchase of former Northern Rock mortgages. It has not provided any new mortgages and 65,000 homeowners are still trapped on high interest rates. May we have a statement on the sale of the loan book from UK Asset Resolution, which was set up by the Treasury?

On the EU, can the Leader of the House clarify either now or in a letter to me—and the House—what has actually been agreed in the negotiations? In her statement on Monday, the Prime Minister said that “95% of the withdrawal agreement and its protocols are now settled.”—[Official Report, 22 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 47.]

The EU’s chief negotiator Michel Barnier said that 90% was resolved. Which is it? The Prime Minister said that the Irish border was still a “considerable sticking point”, and the European Parliament Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt agrees, as he said yesterday that “progress is at 0%” until the Irish border issue is solved. The EU offered to convene a special summit in November to help the Prime Minister, but it seems that that has now been withdrawn and that the special summit will now be in December. Do the Government have any idea when Parliament can express its view on the terms of the deal? We also heard from the almost millions of people who took to the streets of London last week to give us their view.

Will the Leader of the House say whether the Finance Bill vote will be in November? Will it be before the vote on the final deal, or after? We need to know because the Procedure Committee has to respond to the letter of the
shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), of 23 October in which he asked that the business motion allow for multiple amendments to be tabled, selected and voted on before the main motion. This is a sovereign Parliament, not a supine Parliament.

While the Government’s negotiating strategy is in chaos, what are they saying to Sir Paul Nurse and other Nobel prizewinners about the effect on science of our leaving the EU? What are they saying to the CBI, 80% of whose members say that uncertainty has had a great impact on their investment decisions? What are the Government doing following the freedom of information request that revealed that most NHS trusts have made no preparations for Brexit, despite worries about the effect on staffing and the availability of drugs? We could have a statement on this, but better still, could the Government update the sectoral analysis on how much money they are going to give to each sector?

I, too, want to join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in sending my good wishes to Sir Jeremy Heywood. He has spent 35 years in the civil service as Cabinet Secretary, permanent secretary to two Prime Ministers at No. 10 and, among other jobs, principal private secretary to two Chancellors. His first job in the civil service was as an economic adviser to the Health and Safety Executive. We wish him all the best; we have lost a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge.

I also want to send my good wishes to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who have all taken a tumble recently. We wish them a speedy recovery.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that some of our colleagues seem to have been a bit accident prone recently. I would add my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) to that list, and I wish them all a speedy recovery.

The hon. Lady asked about the Offensive Weapons Bill. The Government have tried twice to debate the next stage of that Bill, but I think all hon. Members will appreciate that there have been some important statements this week. We had the Prime Minister’s statement on the EU Council, and I believe that more than 100 questions were asked of her. We also had an important Government statement on the untimely death of Mr Khashoggi, an absolutely shocking situation that all hon. Members will have wanted to hear about. Mr Speaker also granted two urgent questions, which made it clear that, for the second time, it would not be possible to do justice to the many amendments that Members wanted to discuss within the time agreed by the House for the debate. Unfortunately, we therefore had to delay that business again, but we will reschedule it as soon as we can.

The hon. Lady mentioned the visit to Parliament of a certain individual. I think that all hon. Members would abhor the comments and views of that individual, but I also think that they would uphold the right to free speech. This is a dilemma, and we all need to be careful about how we address it. Nevertheless, I share the hon. Lady’s concern about the views of that individual.

The hon. Lady asked about the statutory instrument on universal credit that is being prayed against by the Opposition. The Government have already scheduled more negative SIs for debate on the Floor of the House than in any Session since 1997. It is a matter of parliamentary convention that, where a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time should be allowed for that debate. I think that we have demonstrated in this Session that the Government are willing to provide time in line with that convention and to accede to reasonable requests made by the Opposition, and we will continue to do so.

With regard to Brexit, the Prime Minister made it very clear in her statement on the preparations on Monday that there had been extraordinary progress. She also went through a number of areas of concern to the House, such as the outstanding issues on Gibraltar, on EU citizens’ rights here and UK citizens’ rights in the EU, and on financial payments. There has been a huge amount of progress.

The PM also made it clear that there is a serious sticking point around Northern Ireland and the EU’s desire for a backstop whereby Northern Ireland is kept within the customs union. That would lead to a border down the Irish sea, which would be unacceptable to any UK Government—I am sure that all hon. Members would agree with that. There has been great progress, but some sticking points remain.

The hon. Lady mentioned last weekend’s march for a second referendum, so it would be interesting if the Opposition made it clear whether they support a second referendum. The Government have made it clear that we absolutely do not support such a move, and we fully intend to respect the view of the people, as expressed in the 2016 referendum.

The hon. Lady asked about the meaningful vote but, as I hoped that I had explained last week, once the deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership, and Parliament will have the choice to accept or reject that deal. The House will already be well aware that whether debate ought to be organised through a business of the House motion, and the form of any such motion, will ultimately be in the hands of the House itself, which has the power to amend, approve or reject such a motion.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the Government’s Brexit preparations. I absolutely reassure all hon. Members that the Government are preparing for all eventualities,
including a no-deal Brexit. I sit on a committee that looks at least once a week at different aspects of the no-deal preparations, which are far advanced.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My constituent Amanda Koppel from Kirriemuir has been a tireless campaigner for Frank’s law—which will support thousands across Scotland who are suffering with dementia—after losing her husband Frank to the disease at the age of 65. Amanda is now hosting a fundraising dinner on Saturday at Frank’s old football ground, Dundee United’s Tannadice Park. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should champion those who give so much to ensure that no one goes through what they have been through? May we have a debate to celebrate people such as Amanda?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Amanda on a fantastic achievement and wish her great success with the event. My hon. Friend is right to highlight our gratitude for the work of volunteers, fundraisers and campaigners and some of the things that make us one of the most generous countries in the world. Through the Government’s “Challenge on Dementia 2020”, we are working towards a society in which every person with dementia receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to end of life. My parliamentary office staff and I have all undertaken dementia-friendly training in the past couple of weeks, and I recommend it to all hon. Members. It really is a fantastic way for all of us to be more attuned to the needs of those with dementia and their carers.

Mr Speaker: I endorse that call. My own office undertook that training over a year ago—I cannot remember exactly when, but it was well over a year ago—and it is a very good training programme and well worth enjoying—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) does not need to be frivolous about it; it is in fact a serious point.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. It has been a depressing and dispiriting few weeks for those of us who are concerned about workplace bullying in this place, and Dame Laura Cox’s report contains a damming litany of the scale of the problem. The Leader of the House has been an effective champion in tackling the problem, and I am glad to see that a debate on Dame Laura’s report has been scheduled for a week on Monday.

We know that the report will be implemented in full, but it is time to challenge the ingrained culture of and the power relationships within this House, and an easy start would be to tackle the deference. That means no more “hon. Gentlemen”, no more swords, no more spying strangers or segregated areas. For goodness’ sake, it should really mean the end of people calling themselves Lords on the parliamentary estate. If we are serious about changing the workplace culture and environment, we must challenge those symbols and power relationships, and I hope that we can include that as part of our ongoing work.

Simply appalling remarks were made in the Scottish Parliament yesterday when the Conservative social security spokesperson, a Ms Michelle Ballantyne, said about the two-child benefit cap:

“It is fair that people on benefits cannot have as many children as they like.”—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 24 October 2018; c. 52.] That comment has shocked and appalled mainstream opinion in Scotland. We do not want those 19th-century Tory Victorian values in Scotland. We want a social security system designed with dignity and respect at its heart. Can we have a debate on further devolution of social security so that the views of people such as Ms Ballantyne hold no sway in our nation?

Lastly, Mr Speaker, we are very grateful to you for allowing MP4 to use Speaker’s House tonight for the launch of our new single. We have teamed up with Musicians Against Homelessness and Crisis to draw cross-party attention to homelessness throughout the UK. I do not think we will bother the charts, and we are not seriously considering giving up the day job, but I hope the Leader of the House might be among the first to download the single this evening.

Mr Speaker: MP4 are a great band and, as the hon. Gentleman will recall, they have performed in my constituency—I have very fond memories of that experience. The band have been in Speaker’s House before, and I am keen that they should come again and again.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I completely share your enthusiasm for MP4. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) might want to think about a cover version of a well-known song: “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. I will leave that thought with him.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman: his personal involvement in the establishment of the complaints procedure and his absolute commitment to stamping out bullying and harassment wherever we see it are completely united with those of the entire working group. This was a fantastic piece of cross-party work, and there can be no doubt that all hon. and right hon. Members want to see change in this place.

The hon. Gentleman raises some interesting suggestions, and I have a lot of sympathy for what he says. I am therefore delighted to provide a debate on Monday 5 November so that we can hear from all hon. Members about the changes they want to see. I would prefer to see structural changes, rather than superficial changes to titles—perhaps something a little more deep and meaningful. I hope that on that Monday we will also be able to discuss what structural changes could be made.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the Scottish Parliament and further devolution. Of course funding for the Scottish Government, the block grant, will have grown to more than £31 billion by 2020, a real-terms increase over the current spending review period. It is for the Scottish Government to make some of their own decisions, rather than just looking to the UK Parliament to resolve those issues for them.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on childhood cancers? My constituent Mrs Lorraine Mitchell tragically lost her young, much-loved son Finn in June 2018. The family are still very raw about it and, although they do not wish to blame anyone for his death, they feel there is a lack of awareness of the symptoms of childhood cancer.
Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about the loss of Finn. I am sure the whole House will want to send our sincere condolences to Lorraine and her family. Cancer is a terrible disease but, thankfully, survival rates have been improving year on year. For childhood cancers, 82% of children now survive for five years or more, but of course there is so much more to do and that figure will be no consolation to Lorraine and her family.

This month the Prime Minister has made it clear that she is determined to introduce a package of measures to invest in state-of-the-art technology to transform how we diagnose cancers, as well as to boost research and innovation. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is right that it is also vital to raise awareness among doctors, who often do not expect to see cancers in the very young, so that we do not miss out on early diagnosis.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am also grateful to the Leader of the House for the business statement. I assure her that the Backbench Business Committee is still here and that we have managed to timetable debates in Westminster Hall—they are on today’s Order Paper—for 6, 15, 20, 22 and 27 November and 4 December. I remind her that, by the week beginning 12 November, it will have been four parliamentary weeks since the Committee has had any time in the Chamber. I ask her to look favourably on our getting some time in the week beginning 12 November, because we are starting to build up a backlog of unheard debates that require Chamber time for votable motions. I would appreciate her giving that some consideration.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am keen to support the Backbench Business Committee. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Standing Orders specify that it is allocated 35 days each Session. So far in this Session more days than that have already been provided—
[Interruption.] He says it is a longer Session, and I absolutely accept that, but I hope he will appreciate that he was asking for a debate on folic acid, which takes more days than that have already been provided.

Mark Pritchard (Wrexham) (Lab): It is not about the number of days; it is about the prioritisation of what is easy and what is right.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that a fundamental change to the funding formula is required. I hope a Minister might come to the House by order of the Leader of the House to explain to us when an urgent review of the police funding formula is going to take place to benefit counties such as Lincolnshire and others. This is a choice: between chaos and order; between penny pinchers and the people; and between what is easy and what is right.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In a world that is frail, faulted and fallen, lives that might otherwise be made brutish, nasty and even short are prevented from being so by our police forces, which stand between us and disorder. Yet, as you know, Mr Speaker, the hot-off-the-press Home Affairs Committee report I have here paints a sorry picture of overstretched police forces, rising rates of crime and fewer people brought to justice. My own county of Lincolnshire is particularly affected, with our force being one of the poorest-funded in the country. The report goes on to say that a fundamental change to the funding formula is required. I hope a Minister might come to the House by order of the Leader of the House to explain to us when an urgent review of the police funding formula is going to take place to benefit counties such as Lincolnshire and others. This is a choice: between chaos and order; between penny pinchers and the people; and between what is easy and what is right.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In March, NHS England changed its guidance on conditions for which over-the-counter items should not be routinely prescribed in primary care, with one being head lice. An average bottle of head lice shampoo costs between £10 and £12, which is a significant sum for parents in the most deprived areas. The charity Community Hygiene Concern fears that that decision will lead to an epidemic in schools and communities. Please may we have a debate, in Government time, about the effects of that change in NHS guidance?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of that and I share the hon. Lady’s concern; I remember the nightmare of trying to get rid of head lice when my kids were young, and I am sure all hon. Members will have their own horror stories of how persistent head lice are. I am very sympathetic about this, and if she wishes to write to me, I will be able to take it up with the Department of Health and Social Care. Alternatively, I encourage her to put in a written question to see whether she can get an answer directly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on the 384 bus, so that hon. Members can urge the Mayor and Transport for London to drop their plans to remove this much-valued bus route from many roads in New Barnet?

Andrea Leadsom: We are all big bus fans, although, sadly, I do not think I have ever taken that bus. My right hon. Friend should certainly challenge any reduction in bus services, and I thoroughly recommend that she raises the matter directly with Ministers to see what pressures can be brought to bear on the Mayor.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Leader of the House knows that we produced a report on acquired brain injury recently. One of the new statistics is that about 60% of people going into prison, when they have been properly screened, have had a brain injury; many of them did not know that. In January, we are going to have a brain screening session for all Members of Parliament. I wonder whether she could make a room available so that every Member of Parliament can go through the screening that we would like to see for prisoners.
Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area; he really has brought this issue to the House’s attention in a significant way. I absolutely support him in his desire to make that facility available to all Members. From my own passion for early brain development, I know just how profound the effect of the development of the brain and any subsequent brain injury can be on personality, character and outcomes for human beings.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A key policy currently pursued by Sussex police and crime commissioner, Katy Bourne, is the recruitment of 200 additional officers between now and 2022. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the importance of supporting frontline community policing?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend’s news about the Sussex PCC’s policy. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question, a number of PCCs have decided to increase the number of frontline police officers in their areas. We should pay tribute to all police officers and staff, who do a fantastic job every day to keep us safe. I am glad that Crawley will benefit from more officers on the beat. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss with Ministers this issue, and in particular how other areas can benefit from the sensible decision of his local PCC.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The provision of in vitro fertilisation treatment on the NHS is currently a postcode lottery, with some areas offering an entitlement to three fully funded IVF cycles while others offer just one, and there are areas where people are not offered any at all. May we have a debate in Government time on regional variations in IVF provision and the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that all clinical commissioning groups give this treatment the priority that it deserves, in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. I have had constituents come to me who have had different experiences with one CCG versus another, and who have found for themselves, at the sharp end, that there really is a postcode lottery, so I am really sympathetic to the hon. Lady for pointing this out. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that she and others can talk directly to Ministers about what more can be done to provide fairness and equality for all those who seek IVF support.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate to celebrate the many local fireworks displays that will occur in the next two weeks? Tomorrow evening, the Portgordon fireworks display will put on a spectacular show for people who come from near and far. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Kenny Gunn and his team of volunteers? This year’s event is the 25th anniversary of the fantastic show that they put on for the local community.

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend has volunteered at the event for many years, and I understand that everyone who helps out is treated to a feast of stovies or macaroni in the village hall after the display. I absolutely join him in congratulating Kenny Gunn and all the volunteers for everything that they do to make the event bigger and better every year. Fireworks night has a particular historic resonance for us in Parliament, so it is rather fitting to be talking about it at a time when we could say that the debate here has been quite explosive on a few different fronts.

Chris Bryant: That was terrible! Resign. Instantly. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As the Leader of the House will no doubt be aware, off-grid gas and heating oils, which are essential in rural communities such as those in the Highlands, are unregulated, and there is no way for Ofgem to intervene where there is a monopoly. Will she allow a debate in Government time on the regulation of off-grid fuel and end the great winter rural fuel rip-off?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman, because this is an ongoing problem for those who are off grid. I encourage him to seek a debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall, so that other Members who represent rural areas with similar problems can share their concerns. The Government have made great efforts to try to get people on to the grid and to try to regulate better the prices that are charged, but it is an ongoing problem.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The crisis around Crossrail seems to worsen every single day, with the project delayed by nine months and having overspent by £600 million. Contradictory evidence seems to be being created by the Mayor of London and the Department for Transport, so may we have a Government statement on what is happening to get the project back on track and within budget?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We have all been concerned to hear of the delays to Crossrail. I encourage him to raise it in the Budget debate next week where he can ask Treasury Ministers exactly what steps can be taken.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Civil Aviation Authority has just published its response to a consultation on flight paths, and it has ignored thousands of my constituents and those in other constituencies by insisting on narrowed flight paths with all the consequences that flow from that. It has also indicated, in an official document, that I did not present to it the petition signed by thousands of my constituents. As I have photographs of me presenting that petition, it means either that I am incompetent or that it is misleading the Government. Either way, it is pretty worrying for all of us. May we have a debate, or at least a statement, on the CAA and flight paths?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman’s experience. If he wants to write to me, I can take that up with the Department for Transport on his behalf.
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I commend the Government for their investment in road infrastructure and their commitment to spend £23 billion by the end of 2020 on improving roads around the country. However, road improvements come with unforeseen consequences. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time to discuss the upgrading to smart motorways and the impact that closer running lanes have on existing communities along the line of the motorways?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Smart motorways increase capacity, reduce congestion and improve the reliability of journey times by making the hard shoulder available as a traffic lane and by using variable speed limits to smooth traffic flow, which, of course, then supports economic growth because there are fewer queues. Almost a billion journeys have been made on smart motorways. In 2017, Highways England completed a three-year study on the M25 that shows that it is as safe as other motorways. However, if she does have specific concerns, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate about the impact on her own community.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Last week a constituent of mine was tragically murdered outside his home. Yesterday, I held a meeting for the community so that people could voice their concerns, and the community was clear that, for too long, it has been neglected by the local council and by Government. Youth and community services have been cut and police officers taken off our streets. The Home Affairs Committee report today warned that cuts are making policing irrelevant. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this dire consequence of police cuts?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear about the death of the hon. Lady’s constituent. All too often, the rise in serious violence, particularly in knife crime, has had terrible consequences for too many people, especially young people. We are determined to tackle this issue, which is why we have introduced a new £40 million serious violence strategy that will help to tackle the changing nature of crime, and we are giving extra powers to the police to tackle knife crime through the Offensive Weapons Bill. We want to reach a place where young people are not, so standards do need to be raised and be more consistent to keep our communities safe.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Yesterday, the loan charge action group lobbied Parliament. It represents 100,000 families, including those of nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers and contractors. Retrospective taxation by this Government going back 20 years means that many of these families will lose their home and be forced into bankruptcy and, I am afraid, some will commit suicide. That cannot have been the intention of the Government. May we have a debate on the impact that cuts are making policing irrelevant. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this dire consequence of police cuts?

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware yesterday of a lobby here in Parliament of those affected by the loan charge issue. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it. I encourage him to seek an opportunity to raise it during the Budget debate next week where Treasury Ministers will be available, or indeed on 6 November in Treasury questions.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): My constituent, Mavis Walton, is 99 years old. In her early years, she worked in munitions, building the bombs that served our country. These canary girls have never had the recognition that they deserve. I am sure that the Leader of the House understands the urgency of this question. With Remembrance Sunday just around the corner, could we have a statement from the relevant Minister, announcing medals for these women? It is the least that they deserve.

Andrea Leadsom: May I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to her constituent on reaching the age of 99, as well as the work she did as one of the canary girls? It is the most amazing story of self-sacrifice and contribution to keeping our nation safe. There is a debate a week on Tuesday—not on the canary girls, but on the Armistice centenary—so the hon. Lady might choose that opportunity to raise this issue more fully, but there will certainly be other chances to pay tribute to all those who gave such great service to our country.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): We have recently returned from a very important—if not tumultuous—meeting of the Council of Europe. Is not it time that we had a debate on the activities and future of the Council of Europe?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me previously and I am sympathetic to the idea. We have a lot of discussions about Europe at the moment, but I am keen to consider this matter and to give it time when we can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I think it is true to say that all Members of the House believe that veterans and ex-servicemen and women deserve the very best care that the state can possibly offer, but it would also be true to say that that is just not happening. It is a scandal that the Ministry of Defence does not record suicides among ex-servicemen and women. This happens in many other countries and we should make it happen here. May we have a debate on the issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask what more we can do to support our armed forces and the amazing work that they do on our behalf. He will be aware that this Government introduced the armed forces covenant into law to improve support for our armed forces, but he has raised an interesting question that I encourage him to raise directly with Ministers at the next Defence questions.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has mentioned the parliamentary concert next week, when the Parliament choir will sing—together with the German Bundestag choir—Mozart’s “Mass in C Minor” to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. Perhaps we could have a debate on or consider mentioning—as I am sure you will be at the concert next week, Mr Speaker—the conflict between Britain and Germany
that occurred at the same time in east Africa. I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania. Hundreds of thousands of Tanganyikans died in the conflict as a result of either the violence or the resulting famine, yet they are hardly ever remembered in these circumstances. It would be a great honour to those people, who gave their lives in a conflict that was nothing to do with them, if we were to remember them as well.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to mention the appalling events that took place in the great war. Of course, a week on Tuesday we will have a debate on the centenary of the Armistice, which would be a good opportunity to raise all the appalling events and to commemorate the sacrifice of so many right around the world.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In September, I met London Members of the Youth Parliament to discuss the recommendations of the Youth Violence Commission. I was pleased that they had all read the report and understood the importance of adopting a public health approach. I have to be honest; I worry that too many politicians, including the Home Secretary, bandy around the words and do not really understand them. So, for the third time, has the Leader of the House spoken with the Home Secretary to agree when we will debate this very important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I have written to the Minister concerned seeking advice on the next steps, in response to the hon. Lady’s request that I do so. As she will know, there is now a new £22 million early intervention youth fund and a new £3.6 million national county lines co-ordination centre was launched last month. There is a lot more to do and I hope to have an answer for her shortly regarding the next steps.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last weekend, Ben McAulay from Galashiels in my constituency led a sponsored walk in the borders to thank medical staff from the Royal Hospital for Children in Glasgow who treated him after he was born with a hole in the heart. Ben is just two years old. Will the Government find time to debate the efforts of local fundraisers, and to congratulate Ben and his family, and all those who took part in Toddle Around Tweedbank?

Andrea Leadsom: As always, my hon. Friend raises a really important issue for his constituency. Many of us are aware of the heroic efforts by our constituents to raise money, awareness or support for excellent causes. I am delighted to join him in congratulating Ben, his family, and all those who took part in Toddle Around Tweedbank last week.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the cricketing community at Hanging Heaton cricket club on the edge of my constituency? In the past two years, under the chairmanship of John Carruthers and the captaincy of Gary Fellows, they have won no less than seven trophies, including the Heavy Woollen cup, which is England’s oldest competition, and they are the first Yorkshire team to win the national Twenty20 cup. May we have a debate on the contributions that sporting clubs make in our local communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very significant achievement by that cricket club, and I absolutely join her in congratulating it on all its efforts and achievements. She is right to raise the amazing contribution of sports clubs to life in our communities through keeping people fit and outside, where they can enjoy the fresh air and have a bit of fun. I join her in paying tribute to them. She might well like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can share her experience with Ministers directly.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Last year, three cyclists died on the roads of Lincolnshire and seven children on bicycles were seriously injured. We would all like to see more people cycling—in my flat part of Lincolnshire, it is very easy—so may we have a debate on what more we can do to make cycling safer and more attractive, and also to work on road safety?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have introduced a £1.2 billion cycling and walking investment strategy to encourage more people to get on their bike or to walk, and also to make roads safer for vulnerable users. We have also invested £7 million in making cycling the natural transport choice in cities right across the UK. That is very important so that we reduce emissions, leaving a cleaner and greener Britain for our children. I absolutely applaud him for raising this important issue. I encourage him to seek a Back-Bench debate, because there are very strong advantages to encouraging more people to get out of their cars and on to the roads on their bicycles, or on to the pavements on their feet.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will have seen reports in the Yorkshire Post that for large parts of 2019 and into 2020, east coast main line trains from the north to London will terminate an hour outside London, at Peterborough. This is due to remodelling work at King’s Cross station, with another £250 million to be spent on top of the £500 million already spent. In Hull, we are used to timetabling chaos and trains terminating early, and we are certainly not used to money being spent on our station. With major disruption planned for next year and into 2020, may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary about how this will affect all our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that for large parts of 2019 and into 2020, east coast main line trains from the north to London will terminate an hour outside London, at Peterborough. This is due to remodelling work at King’s Cross station, with another £250 million to be spent on top of the £500 million already spent. In Hull, we are used to timetabling chaos and trains terminating early, and we are certainly not used to money being spent on our station. With major disruption planned for next year and into 2020, may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary about how this will affect all our constituents?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Debenhams store at the heart of Torquay’s harbourside has been an anchor retailer for Torquay for many years, so this morning’s news that 50 stores might close will of course be causing considerable concern back in my constituency. May we have a statement on what actions the Government are taking in response to this news, what reassurances they can offer, and what action will be taken to mitigate the consequences in towns where stores do close?
Andrea Leadsom: I realise that this will be a stressful and uncertain time for affected employees. Debenhams has confirmed that it plans to close up to 50 of its stores over the next three to five years following the announcement of the company’s preliminary end-of-year results to the stock market. The company has not specified the number of jobs that will be affected or, indeed, which stores will be closed. However, I can certainly confirm that Jobcentre Plus, through the rapid response service, will be ready to support any employee affected by this announcement.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Last week I raised with the Leader of the House the fact that Facebook is only paying £7.4 million in tax. Today, the Information Commissioner has fined Facebook the maximum amount of £500,000 for sharing our data without our consent. The Leader of the House may be aware that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and I are leading an inquiry into the impact of social media on people’s mental health. Will she find time for a debate on the impact that social media platforms are having on tax, information and public health?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue again. The impact of the online harm that is being tolerated by social media giants is a grave concern to the Government. We are working towards the publication this winter of the online harms White Paper, which will set out measures to tackle online harms and clear responsibilities for tech firms to keep citizens safe. Social media firms must take far more responsibility for illegal and harmful content on their platforms, with robust processes in place for removing content—he is absolutely right about that.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): A large number of young people in my constituency have contacted me this week to encourage me to support the private Member’s Bill tomorrow on lowering the voting age to 16. Unfortunately, that Bill is 17th on the list and therefore will not be heard. May we have another debate or statement from the Government on their plans to modernise the private Members’ Bills system so that such Bills can be debated in the House and voted upon?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have indicated on a number of occasions, we are extremely pleased with the progress of a number of private Members’ Bills in the House during this Session. In fact, more private Members’ Bills are progressing to Royal Assent than in previous Sessions. Such Bills include some very important measures, such as that which became the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, as well as the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill and the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, which will be considered tomorrow. Some very important private Members’ Bills are coming forward, and it is right that the House needs to support those Bills. We continue to look at the process for the consideration of private Members’ Bills. I am always happy to look at proposals from the Procedure Committee, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to put forward alternative solutions, I encourage him to speak to the Procedure Committee about them.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May I add the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) to the list of those who have fallen in the House? He missed the Trafalgar night dinner on Wednesday because of a fall and is no longer fit to do duty here.

May we have a debate on automated gates? They are increasingly being used to provide security in schools, businesses and housing estates, yet no qualification, inspection or registration regime is required for them. They are classed as machinery and are dangerous and hazardous if not correctly installed and maintained, so can that be looked at?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in wishing my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire a speedy recovery. This is an appalling time of year for slips and trips.

The hon. Lady raises an important issue that is certainly worth raising directly with Department for Education Ministers, perhaps in an Adjournment debate, so that we can get a clear picture.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on fuel poverty? The warm homes programme was scrapped in 2010, and the take-up of the energy company obligation grant and loans is very poor. The weather has certainly turned in my constituency. We have had universal credit for a year now, and many people are presenting needing food bank vouchers and fuel vouchers. We need Ministers to come to the House to explain how families can meet the costs of basic essentials while they are pushed below the breadline by changes to universal credit.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the problem of fuel poverty. We know that “eating or heating” can be a real challenge for families right across the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this Government have introduced the energy price cap Act to ensure that consumers are not ripped off due to their loyalty to their energy provider. We have also strengthened the energy company obligation to ensure that companies support people who are struggling to meet their heating bills. Since the scheme was launched in 2013, more than one in 16 homes have benefited from over 2.2 million improvements to insulation and so on. We have a target to improve energy efficiency in 2.5 million homes by 2030, and under the warm home discount scheme, more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households are provided with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): One of the Leader of the House’s predecessors told this House that English votes for English laws was necessary to eliminate the anomaly whereby Scottish MPs in Westminster can vote on matters affecting England but English MPs cannot do likewise on issues devolved to the Scottish Parliament. He went on to call English votes for English laws England’s “own piece of the devolution settlement”. —[Official Report, 22 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 1184.] Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her view of Tory MPs representing Scottish constituencies continuing to vote on England-only matters, and also of elected Tory representatives in Scotland viciously and cynically attacking SNP MPs for not voting on England-only matters?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely agree with the views of my predecessor on the purpose and value of the English votes for English laws changes, which I think have proven to be successful. As to the other point that the
hon. Lady makes, this is the first time that she has raised it with me and I would be very happy to discuss it with her.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Leader of the House has already heard about the news of the Debenhams store closures. May we have a debate about her Government’s persistent failure to deal with tax avoidance by online retail giants, which is not just decimating our city centres and high streets, but causing very significant job losses?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that the Chancellor made it clear only recently that he will seek to find a means to ensure that online giants pay their fair share of tax. She will appreciate, as I am sure all hon. Members who care about the economy in this country will appreciate, that we do not want to drive online businesses overseas, where they can be subject to cheaper rates. This is therefore an international challenge, and the Chancellor has made clear his determination to resolve it. I am very sympathetic to what she says. Equally, she should pay tribute to the efforts of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which has closed the tax gap considerably and clamped down on tax avoidance and tax evasion since 2010 in a way that was never achieved when the previous Labour Government were in office.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the statements this morning in support of implementing the Cox report. Anyone who heard Lisette Whittaker’s testimony on Sky News yesterday will understand how important it is that this place is seen to clean up its act. I appreciate that the Leader of the House has scheduled some time in a week or two for a debate on this, but it seems to me that if we are to have a truly independent arbitration process—one that has the confidence of both parties and that is seen to be robust—we may well need legislation. Will the Leader of the House commit to securing enough time to implement such legislation during this Session?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman fully appreciates that I cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and determine legislation right now with no thought of either what the House wants to do, or what those we would wish to consult—the victims—would like to happen. However, I can absolutely assure him that I am determined to grasp this awful problem and to stamp out bullying and harassment once and for all, wherever we see it in this place.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My Kilmarnock constituent Maureen Patterson had a number of issues with her employment and support allowance claim. In her opinion, during one phone call with a decision maker, the person on the phone was rude and disrespectful and used inappropriate language, which upset her. When that was followed up with a complaint, the call could not be checked, because the Department for Work and Pensions does not routinely record outbound calls—we can only guess why. May we therefore have a Government statement about the DWP making a simple procedural change to record all calls, not just incoming ones, to provide protection for vulnerable constituents?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He could raise it with DWP Ministers directly in a parliamentary question, or if he wants to write to me, I can raise it on his behalf.

**Nick Smith** (Blanau Gwent) (Lab): The Invictus games reminds me of Steve Jones, a former Royal Air Force technician and son of Blanau Gwent. Steve held the British marathon record for 33 years and won the London, New York, Toronto and Chicago marathons. May we have a Government statement on how we can properly recognise Steve Jones’s contribution to world athletics and to public life in south Wales?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I think that the hon. Gentleman has just neatly paid his own tribute to his constituent. All hon. Members will have great examples of constituents who have contributed enormously to the sporting life of this great country. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can pay full tribute within the hearing of Ministers.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Fireworks season is upon us, which will bring pleasure to lots of people, but anxiety to our nation’s pets. I am campaigning with the Dogs Trust to raise awareness of how people can enjoy fireworks without causing unnecessary anxiety to our animals. May we have a debate in Government time about how we can best do this?

**Hon. Members**: Hear, hear.

**Andrea Leadsom**: I think the hon. Gentleman can hear he has a lot of support from right across the House. We all like a good fireworks night but, of course, it is a real problem for pets and a real challenge to ensure that we do not cause harm, damage and fear to the nation’s pets. He is absolutely right to raise this point. I would encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate so that he can make his thoughts clear, as I am sure he would have a lot of support.
Immigration: DNA Tests

12.6 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the use of DNA evidence in immigration applications.

Many thousands of immigration applications are received every year that involve people applying to come to, or remain in, the UK on the basis of a family relationship with somebody who is already here. If an individual does not have sufficient evidence to show that they are related to someone in the UK, they sometimes choose to take a DNA test to prove the relationship. Officials then consider this evidence as part of their claim. Very often, it will be to the advantage of the applicant because it can establish family relationships beyond doubt where the other available evidence is sometimes insufficient.

The provision of DNA evidence must, however, be entirely voluntary. At the end of June, it was brought to our attention that there were some immigration cases where the provision of DNA evidence had been made a requirement for the issuance of a visa or the granting of leave to remain, and not simply a request. Such demands are unacceptable. I want to take this opportunity to apologise to those affected by this practice. In this context, the law states that the provision of DNA evidence should always be voluntary and never mandatory. My predecessor made that absolutely clear when she brought in changes in 2014.

Once we were made aware of the issue, we immediately commissioned an urgent internal review, which I am publishing today. Copies will be available in the Library. My right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister will also be writing today to the Home Affairs Committee to outline the key points of the review and to provide a copy. The review covered the legal aspects of DNA use, policy and guidance, caseworking practice and correspondence with applicants, as well as oversight arrangements relating to the use of DNA. It outlines a number of areas in which guidance was unclear or wrong. It also outlines areas of operational practice where DNA evidence was improperly required and provides some initial information on the possible scale of the issue. The review makes a number of recommendations about how to address the root causes within the border, immigration and citizenship system that led to this operational practice.

This review is not, however, a conclusion to the work. The numbers and information in the report have been collected at pace and still need to be fully assured and are subject to change. Further work is needed to ascertain the full scope of the issue. Regardless of the number of people affected, one case is still one too many, and I am determined to get to the bottom of how and why in some cases people could be compelled to supply DNA evidence in the first place.

The majority of cases identified so far have been part of Operation Fugal, which, according to the report, started in April 2016 to address patterns of fraud in some specific family and human rights immigration applications. Letters sent as part of that operation incorrectly stated that the applicant must provide DNA evidence and that not providing such information without a reasonable excuse would lead to the application being refused on suitability grounds. It has been reported that 83 applications had been refused at the time the report was written, and seven of those seem to have been refused on suitability grounds due solely to a failure to provide DNA evidence. A further six appear to have been refused on suitability grounds for failure to provide DNA evidence, although that was not the sole reason.

In addition to Operation Fugal, we have identified an improper approach to the use of DNA evidence in two further areas. The first relates to adult dependent relatives of Gurkhas. In January 2015, a scheme was expanded to allow adult dependent children of Gurkhas who were discharged before 1997 to settle in the UK. Published guidance stated that DNA evidence may be required and that applications may be refused if that evidence was not provided without a reasonable excuse within four weeks. That published guidance was wrong and has now been updated. The report suggests that 51 cases were identified where DNA evidence was requested from applicants at their own cost. At the time the report was written, we were aware of four cases from the same family unit whose application was refused solely because they did not provide DNA evidence. Those decisions have now been corrected.

The second case relates to Afghan nationals. In 2013, applications to resettle in the UK from Afghan nationals who were formerly employed by the UK Government began to be accepted. The terms of the scheme included mandatory DNA testing for family groups, paid for by the UK Government. Current investigations suggest that no one making an application under that scheme was refused because they did not take a DNA test. None the less, mandatory testing should not have been part of the scheme, and that requirement has now been removed.

Let me be clear: across our immigration system, no one should have faced a demand to supply DNA evidence, and no one should have been penalised for not providing it. In particular, I extend my apologies to those Gurkhas and Afghans who have been affected. The two schemes I have described were put in place to help the families of those who have served to keep our country safe, and I am sorry that demands were made of them that never should have been made.

I reassure the House that I am taking action to correct the situation. First, I have given clear instructions that officials must not seek DNA evidence on a mandatory basis in any immigration case. Secondly, I have set up a new taskforce so that anyone who feels that their case may have been influenced in any way by an inappropriate demand for DNA testing can get advice and support. Thirdly, we will be looking to reimburse any individual who has suffered financial loss because we required DNA evidence when we should not have done so. Fourthly, we will continue closely to examine whether this approach might have been taken in any other parts of the immigration system. So far we know that three cohorts have been affected, but we must investigate whether there are any more. I will be asking for independent assurance on everything we do as we establish the facts. Finally, I know that the immigration system is operated by many highly committed people, but we must ensure that the structures and processes they use are fit for the
modern world and fit for the new immigration system that we will be bringing in after we leave the European Union.

I will review more broadly our structures and processes to ensure that they deliver a system in a way that is fair and humane. I will now consider what form that review will take, but my starting point is that it would be helpful to have independent oversight. The review will also need to build on the lessons learned from the Wendy Williams review, and I will want Wendy to play a full part in this wider exercise.

When I became Home Secretary, I made clear that I would be prepared to take action to put right any wrongs as and when I became aware of them. Today, I promise the House that I will get to the bottom of what has gone on in relation to DNA evidence, and I will build an immigration system that provides control but that is also fair, humane and fully compliant with the law.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement on the improper use of DNA evidence. He will be aware that all our constituents, including those of immigrant descent, want an immigration system that is robust, but they also want it to be fair. The widespread public response to the Windrush scandal tells us how seriously the general public take the question of fairness in our immigration system.

We now know from the Home Secretary’s statement that the mandatory provision of DNA was neither legal nor fair. He stated that under the law, DNA evidence must always be provided on a voluntary basis. Can he therefore clarify that the demand for DNA evidence was, in itself, illegal, and if so, what legal consequences will follow? Members across the House will no doubt be shocked to learn that among the first victims of this abuse were Gurkhas and Afghans—men and women who put their lives at risk to keep this country safe. Ministers must clarify how long this practice has been taking place, and under what internal Home Office regime it was allowed or encouraged and at what level.

The Home Secretary spoke about reviewing the current structure and processes of our immigration system, which I welcome. He will be aware that the Law Society has said that there are serious flaws in the immigration system, and one indicator of those flaws is the state of appeals. In the last year for which we have records, fully 50% of appeals were upheld, which is an indicator of a system that is internally flawed. Waiting times for immigration appeals have risen by 45%. The Home Secretary talks about independent oversight, but what more effective oversight is there than a system of appeals that is speedy and that works?

Finally, I remind the Home Secretary that the visa and immigration service faces what will possibly be the biggest single influx of applications in its history when EU nationals who live in the UK seek to settle their status post Brexit. It is a matter of urgency that we put in place processes and structures that can guarantee a speedy, efficient and fair resolution of cases.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She asks a number of reasonable and sensible questions to which I will reply. She started by saying that the immigration system must be robust—we all agree with that, absolutely—and that it must also be fair. The issue I have brought to the House today is of concern to us all and something that, at least in this regard, is not fair. As I said at the start, this should not have happened, and there should not have been any request in any immigration case, whether family related or not, for mandatory DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady asked me to make it clear that this is illegal. My understanding is that the Home Office has never had the express power to require anyone to give DNA. It has never had that express power. There have been a number of Acts over time that have referred to this and tried to make it clear. As I mentioned in my statement, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was, when she was Home Secretary, the first Home Secretary to put it completely beyond doubt by amending an Act—I think a 2007 Act—and then again in 2014 to make it absolutely clear in law. As I say, the Home Office has never had the power to compel anyone to provide DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady will know that we want to have a further review to look into this much more deeply and wanted independent assurance of that. She may be interested to know that we are finding practices, in the cases to which I have already referred, that might go back further. For example, in 2009 two pilots were established by the then Government: the familial testing pilot, which used DNA evidence to verify a child’s biological connection with a family during asylum screening; and the human provenance pilot, which used DNA testing and a technique called isotope analysis to attempt to establish whether asylum applicants were from the country of origin that they had claimed. It is therefore important that we have a review that is thorough and goes back as long as it needs to, because, as I say, the Home Office has never had the power to compel people to supply DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady referred to the broader review of structures and processes. I thank her for welcoming that. She referred to work that has already been done by the Law Society on part of the structures and processes in the immigration system. I have a great regard for the Law Society, which does just this type of work. It is just the kind of organisation we should be listening to.

The right hon. Lady also referred to the appeals process. There have, over recent years, been a number of changes to the appeals process which I think make it fairer, but she is right to raise this issue. This is clearly a very important part of the immigration system, making sure it is fair and that people feel they have had the right to make their case properly and the right to have a person take a second independent look at their case. There is work to be done there.

Finally, the right hon. Lady referred to the EU settlement scheme, which again she is right to refer to. It is a big and ambitious scheme which, over a relatively short period of time, is designed for 3.5 million European citizens. We want them to stay in our country. Whether there is a deal or no deal, we have been very clear that we want them to stay and we want to make that as easy as possible. I do not doubt how ambitious that is. The Home Office has dedicated a significant amount of resources to it and there is significant oversight of the scheme. I can tell her that the reports from the beta testing that has taken place so far, on a limited number
of cases in their thousands, have been very encouraging. If I remember correctly, I think most people found that they could register in about 20 minutes through the app system that has been developed. Approximately over 90% of people asked how they found the process said that it was very straightforward and easy to use, but she is right to raise this issue. It is one of those things we all need to get right.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the review and the recognition that the provision of samples should be on a voluntary basis. However, does the Home Secretary agree that firm immigration control is important and that providing this sort of evidence is a way for an applicant to have their application dealt with in a speedy way? Is it good evidence and a very useful thing. I do not know whether he would like to clarify that, because it seems to me that, yes, it should not be mandatory, but it is a very good thing and often in the interests of the applicant.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point. First and foremost, it is worth stating again that it should never be mandatory to supply DNA evidence. He is right to point out that where individuals feel it can help their case and want to submit DNA evidence voluntarily we should always be open to that. He is also right to say that in many, many cases it helps individuals to make their application and get exactly what they want.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement, although when I saw the title “Immigration” I hoped perhaps he was coming to provide a more detailed answer to my question to the Prime Minister yesterday about the crisis in the visa system. But then the Home Secretary has his fair share of crises to choose from.

The Scottish National party accepts that from time to time DNA can be a fair and useful tool in processing immigration applications, but it is clear now that it has become dangerously and ethnically overused by the Home Office, making life unnecessarily difficult for applicants. We have seen: children who already have British passports being asked for DNA when trying to renew them; other kids being asked for a new test, even though it had already been provided; and, the root of today’s statement, people receiving demands for their DNA even though the guidance said that alternative evidence voluntarily we should always be open to that. He is also right to say that in many, many cases it helps individuals to make their application and get exactly what they want.

Sajid Javid: First of all, the hon. Gentleman refers to DNA testing with regard to the immigration system being overused. I would just caution him. As I said in my statement, more work needs to be done to see how widespread what should not have happened, the mandatory use, was. In many cases, it is voluntary. I hope the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that it should not even be allowed in voluntary cases. [Interruption.] No, he is not. Clearly, where an individual feels it would help their application, I think it is right and proper that the Home Office takes that into account. But let me be clear: where it has been mandatory that it is not acceptable. That should not have happened.

The hon. Gentleman asked about other parts of Government, in particular the Department for Work and Pensions, and, where there is voluntary testing, whether it can be used between Departments. I am happy to take that to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response on that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the funding of DNA tests and whether there is help with funding. The key point is that if a DNA test is funded by the Government, for whatever circumstances, it should only be in a case where it is voluntary, not mandatory.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for rapidly coming to the House and giving us this statement, which sets out a clear plan of action for how to deal with what may arise. The immigration system is highly complex. I look forward to the Government, when they come forward with the immigration Bill, setting out something new, transparent and workable, and which, with sufficient training, will keep our borders safe.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right to point out that the immigration system is highly complex. We have seen evidence today of where it can sometimes go wrong. We should not let that take away from the fact that it successfully processes tens of thousands of applications each year, with lots of hardworking people in the Home Office doing a stellar job. When it goes wrong, however, we need to react. He is right to link this with the new immigration system, which we will introduce after we leave the EU. This is a further lesson on how we can simplify it, maintaining control while also making it fairer and more compassionate.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The contents of the Home Secretary’s statement are shocking and may have had a devastating impact on
families’ lives. It would be helpful to know whether everyone affected has been contacted. I welcome the Home Secretary’s approach but, given that this comes after the Windrush crisis, he will recognise that it means that things have gone badly wrong in the Home Office. So that we can pursue the matter, will he ensure that the full Alex Allan review is sent to the Select Committee? Will the Secretary of State ensure that the review that he has rightly set up is wide enough to include the impact of Government targets, such as the net migration target, on decisions that may have been made on a casework basis?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and for her work as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, which rightly provides scrutiny of such issues. I hope that we have the opportunity to discuss the matter further at the Committee. As I have said, alongside the report that has already been done on this, we will be writing to the Select Committee today with further information that will be published for the whole House.

The right hon. Lady brought up the Windrush scandal, in which, as we now know, many people were wrongly treated. There is ongoing work in terms of lessons to learn from that. As I mentioned in my statement, the work that is being done independently, especially by Wendy Williams, is an important part of the wider review of structures and processes. In relation to Windrush, the right hon. Lady mentioned the Alex Allan review. The Cabinet Secretary is considering that issue, and we will shortly proceed with what we can and cannot publish on that.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Home Secretary spoke with alacrity and clarity about the need to get the system right and, in the words of the shadow Home Secretary, to make sure that it is both fair and robust. To that end, it is important that people who choose to offer DNA should be encouraged to do so, if it speeds up their cases. All of us across this Chamber have dealt with cases in which there have been long delays and people have been left in almost endless limbo. The voluntary provision of DNA might be a helpful tool for dealing with that. I hope that the Home Secretary will look at that in the review that he is about to carry out.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is good to remind the House that my statement was about the wrongful mandatory use of DNA evidence; as he says, DNA evidence can be a very helpful tool when it is completely voluntary. I understand that the Home Office has, in some cases, helped individuals to do that on an absolutely voluntary basis, because the provision of such evidence can help people, especially if they are in particularly distressing or difficult situations or they are otherwise vulnerable. I think it is helpful to point out that when someone chooses to provide DNA evidence, and it is purely their choice, that should be taken into account.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement, and particularly for his tone and apology. Is it not the case, however, that the DNA scandal suggests that the Home Office’s hostile environment policy pushed officials to break the law? Will his structure review consider a root-and-branch reform of this nasty culture and consider giving the processing of immigration and asylum applications to a new unit that is independent from the Home Office—a unit that can ignore political pressures and simply work efficiently, fairly and lawfully?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his tone and apology. Is it not the case, however, that we have a robust immigration policy that is fair to people, but that enables us to be strong on those who set out to abuse our immigration system and enter or settle in our country illegally—for example, in fraudulent cases—not least to be fair to those who use legal routes for migration to or settlement in the UK.

It is worth reminding the right hon. Gentleman that for five years he was part of a Government that worked on compliant environment policies, which began many years before that with previous Governments. He now appears to have a problem with some of those policies, but I do not remember him raising them when I sat alongside him in Cabinet. That said, there absolutely are lessons to learn from this. We must conduct the right review, with independent oversight, and learn those lessons.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Unlike the vast majority of my colleagues in this Chamber, I am an immigrant to this country. I am proud to be the first Polish-born British Member of Parliament. When I came here in 1978, if the state had asked me for a DNA sample, I would have had no problems whatsoever with providing that. I disagree fundamentally with the Secretary of State, and I do not understand why he is apologising. Does he have the full support of the Cabinet for his statement? What is the matter with the United Kingdom asking for a DNA sample when somebody comes to this country and seeks to become a British citizen?

Sajid Javid: Let me take my hon. Friend’s question in two parts. First, he pointed out that he is an immigrant. I love immigrants who have settled in our country, and that includes him. On his second point, whether or not he thinks we should mandate the provision of DNA—he is entitled to his own view on that—the law does not allow us to mandate it, and that is why I am apologising.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary confirm that, where the Home Office holds DNA evidence that it did not obtain lawfully, and that it should not have obtained, the evidence will be deleted from its records?

Sajid Javid: That is another good question. I wish I could confirm whether the Home Office does or does not hold such evidence and if it does, to what extent, but I do not have answers to all the questions. When I have the answers and they have been independently looked at, I will be very happy to come back to the hon. Lady and give her a proper response.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Can the Home Secretary confirm that, where there is other proof of parentage—for example, a birth certificate—a DNA test, even if provided on a voluntary basis, will not be requested?
Sajid Javid: I am happy to confirm that for my hon. Friend. It is worth highlighting that applicants who voluntarily provide DNA often do so because they are in conflict zones, because they are from countries where records have been destroyed or have become unreliable, or because they have become refugees and can no longer access their records. In such a case, someone may voluntarily offer DNA, which can provide a quick way of determining the facts and helping that person.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In his statement, the Home Secretary said that the matter was brought to Ministers’ attention at the end of June. I very much welcome the statement, but I wonder whether Ministers asked questions of officials at any point to reassure themselves that DNA samples and evidence were being used appropriately.

Sajid Javid: As I understand it, the matter was originally brought to Ministers’ attention by a question from the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who is on the Opposition Front Bench. I believe he had concerns as a result of a constituency case and he tabled a written question, to which the Minister for Immigration responded, about Government policy. As I have said today, it has never been Government policy to request DNA mandatorily. The question prompted further investigation, and within days of the matter being brought to the Minister’s attention an internal review was launched. We now have the outcome of that first review, but, as I have said, it is not the conclusion of this. We need more answers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many immigration applications are made each year on the basis of a family relationship, and in what proportion is immigration applied for in this country for four decades. She has been resident—in the UK for 41 years and has been married to a UK national for as long as I have been alive, but she is unable to obtain a UK passport in her married name, by which she has been known in this country for four decades. She has been told that, if she changes back to her name of 40 years ago, she may be able to obtain a passport. Will the Home Secretary look at her case, and exercise some of the common sense that has been lacking thus far?

Sajid Javid: That is a good question. I do not have the information at hand, but I would be very happy to write to my hon. Friend.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituent Maria, who has dual nationality, has been resident—in the UK for 41 years and has been married to a UK national for as long as I have been alive, but she is unable to obtain a UK passport in her married name, by which she has been known in this country for four decades. She has been told that, if she changes back to her name of 40 years ago, she may be able to obtain a passport. Will the Home Secretary look at her case, and exercise some of the common sense that has been lacking thus far?

Sajid Javid: It is worth our reminding ourselves that the Gurkhas have been an integral part of our British armed forces for more than 200 years. We owe them—the Gurkhas who are in Britain and the Gurkhas who are not, and their predecessors—in immense gratitude for everything that they have done to help our country. That is precisely why a scheme was already in place, before the DNA issue arose, to help Gurkhas to settle in the UK if they chose to do so. We have discovered through the review that was carried out that when the scheme was expanded to allow even more Gurkhas—and the adult dependent children of Gurkhas who were already here—to settle, some were improperly asked to provide DNA, and, indeed, told that they must do so. In the cases of which I am currently aware in which that was done and visas were refused, we have corrected the position and the visas have been issued, but at this point I cannot tell the House that those are the only cases, because there is a further review to be conducted.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s determination to improve the immigration system. The use of DNA evidence is an important tool, but it is clearly not mandatory under the law. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the significant number of Gurkha veterans and their families who reside in my constituency that he will continue to ensure that all outstanding cases, and those not yet identified, are dealt with expeditiously and in a way that is sympathetic to the people involved, and that those who have been affected will be compensated?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend some assurances on just that issue. The cases at which we are currently looking, particularly those involving Gurkhas, will be dealt with expeditiously, as he has requested, and there will be no mandatory requirement for DNA evidence. Should people wish to provide it, that is entirely up to them, and of course it will be considered. As I said in my statement, we are looking at ways of reimbursing those who may have had to spend money on DNA tests.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The doctrine of ministerial responsibility makes it clear that Ministers are responsible for what goes wrong in their Departments even if they knew nothing about it. I appreciate that the Home Secretary has taken that to heart today, and has come to the House to apologise. There is also a longstanding convention that, when something goes badly wrong in a Department—and surely acting illegally is pretty badly wrong—the only honourable course for the Minister is to resign. Does that doctrine still apply in the Home Office today?

Sajid Javid: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would be interested in helping to sort things out when they go wrong. That would be the way in which to try to help his constituents if they were caught in something like this. However, it is appropriate that, as we do further work and carry out a review, we look into the chronology of all this and how far it goes back. I have asked officials to establish the exact chronology of events, and to find out what advice was given to what Ministers and when.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Mandatory DNA testing is not only illegal but unethical, and it can put lives at risk. I therefore welcome the statement, but does my right hon. Friend agree that in building a fair and humane system, we must also recognise the importance of the confidentiality of medical records? Will he look at a letter that I received from NHS Digital on 22 October, in my capacity as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, expressing concern about revised guidance that followed assurances given in the House about the importance of confidentiality earlier this year?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience of these issues, and I strongly agree with her that mandatory DNA testing is not only unlawful but unethical. She raised the issue of confidentiality and mentioned a letter that she was sent as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I should be happy to look at that and to respond to her fully.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary has outlined a shocking and illegal breach of trust on the part of Home Office and immigration officials. He will, of course, be aware that the Home Office is the only Department of its kind in Europe that operates an arbitrary and non-limited form of detention. Under that system, 27,000 people were detained last year, 50% of whom were subsequently released. They included one of my constituents, Duc Nguyen, a Vietnamese national who is a victim of human trafficking and human slavery. It is against Home Office protocols to detain such people. Will the Home Secretary undertake to investigate whether coercive DNA-gathering practices have been taking place in detention centres under the Home Office?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman states that we have an “arbitrary” approach to detention; I strongly rebut that—we do not have such an approach. He should know that when anyone is detained, there must be a reasonable prospect of removal within a reasonable time. In recognising that improvements could nevertheless be made to our detention system, we commissioned the Shaw review, and as the hon. Gentleman may recall, I came to the House not so long ago to respond to the review and accepted many of its recommendations.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Having repeated his commitment to improving the fairness and humanity of the immigration system, will my right hon. Friend pay particular attention to the system of visit visas, which causes so much misery, so often, to thousands of British people just because their families happen to be outside the European Union?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As we define and set up a new immigration system when we leave the EU, we shall have much broader scope and opportunities to improve that situation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Immigration cases are often complex, and I thank the Home Office and its team for the sensitive and timely manner in which they have dealt with a number of cases that have crossed my desk recently. I also thank my right hon. Friend for the wider review of the immigration system. Surely what is most important is that we get the structures right so that fast and clear decisions can be made when necessary.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. She is absolutely right about the importance of that wider review of the structures and processes. She refers to cases that she is meant to bring to the attention of Ministers. Although it seems from what she said that those have been resolved, Members should not feel that they must keep bringing cases to Ministers’ attention. I should like to see a system in which the vast majority of cases are sorted out properly in the first place, and that is the kind of system that I am trying to build.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the comprehensive review of the immigration system that the Home Secretary has announced. In that fair and humane spirit, will he incorporate the provisions of my British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill, which is on the Order Paper for consideration tomorrow, in the provisions of the new nationality legislation? They would give British citizenship to people descended from British subjects who were forcibly removed from the Chagos Islands in the late 1960s.

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for spotting this opportunity. He has brought forward a Bill that I know that he has thought long and hard about, and we have discussed it. It might be helpful—if he feels that it would be helpful—for him to have a meeting with the Immigration Minister to discuss the matter further.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): The Home Secretary has mentioned ensuring that we have fairness in our immigration system. Fairness also means dealing with abuse of the system, particularly through the use of fraudulent documentation. When I was a Minister, I was struck by the increasing complexity of fraudulent cases, particularly those that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency was investigating in Swansea. Will the Home Secretary give an assessment of the extent of fraudulent documentation in the immigration system and tell us what the Home Office is doing to tackle it?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. Everyone wants a fair and compassionate system, but they also want that system to be robust and for the rules to be enforced. If someone tries to take advantage of the system, clearly that must be pursued. I referred in my statement to Operation Fugal, and I understand that one reason why it was begun was that a pattern of fraud was recognised by Home Office officials. When many of those cases were investigated by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service brought charges against individuals. I will not talk about those particular cases, for obvious reasons, but that helps to demonstrate that when people are engaging in wrongdoing, we will pursue that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s leadership and the robust steps he is taking, but can he confirm whether there are any known outstanding cases? If so, will the processing of them be expedited?

Sajid Javid: There may be some known cases that are outstanding and we are expediting them. Operation Fugal addresses some complex cases involving DNA that might have been mandatorily required and that need further investigation, but we will try to deal with those within days when we can.
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My right hon. Friend alluded in his statement to guidance that was unclear or wrong. Can he assure the House that guidance for the new immigration system will be put in place as we leave the EU will be correct and clear?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I am happy to give that assurance, and it is a perfectly fair question. When a Home Secretary stands at the Dispatch Box and says that there was wrong guidance in the past, one of the lessons that can be learned without needing a review is that we must be much more careful about guidance in the future.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): On my right hon. Friend’s wider review of structures and processes, will he ensure that Border Force, a key Home Office agency, fully considers the potential of new and advanced technologies in making sure that our future border security system is both fair and efficient?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Border Force and some of the technology it uses are already way ahead of the situation in many other countries. However, as we develop a new immigration system, Border Force has been looking at what other countries have done that we could learn from. Lessons were learned, for example, from a recent exercise with Australia, and we can look at some things that are being done there.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Anyone choosing to drive on Britain’s roads does so with the understanding that from time to time a police officer may stop them and require them to provide a specimen of breath, failing which they could be liable to prosecution. In those circumstances, does my right hon. Friend agree that a system that is optional and scrupulously safeguards the human rights of immigrants is exactly as it should be?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He has again emphasised that providing DNA should be optional, because it can help those individuals, and if they choose to provide it, we should take that seriously, but it should be just that—optional, not mandatory.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and welcome the steps that he is taking to put this situation right. Does he agree that it is essential in cases of this nature that the Government act not only quickly, but with openness and transparency?

Sajid Javid: I agree, and that is why I decided to publish and put in the Library for the whole House to see the internal review that has already been done and was commissioned within days. That is why I will be writing to the Home Affairs Committee today as well, and no doubt there will be future opportunities to keep the House updated, whether by me, the Minister for Immigration or another Minister.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s openness and bluntness in his statement. DNA evidence will clearly be useful in cases when people have come from areas of conflict and other forms of records might no longer be available. How will he look to set out to those who are looking to apply for immigration status in this country how DNA evidence will help them, but is not required to be provided by them?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. Let me refer again to the scheme to help Afghan nationals. Afghanistan is a good example of a clear conflict zone. Many Afghan nationals, such as interpreters, help British forces, and we owe them a duty of respect and have a responsibility to them. I had already made changes a few months ago to welcome more of them to settle in our country, if they wish, and from a safety point of view we must help in such cases. Under that scheme, they should not have been told that this was mandatory. Once the system is explained, people might believe that providing DNA will help them and then choose to do so. In those cases involving Afghan nationals from that conflict zone, given the work they did for this country, we can even look to pay for that, but the key point is that the process should always be optional for them.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the news that my right hon. Friend has set up an urgent review, but given that DNA evidence has been sought from applicants under successive Governments, does he agree that this issue should not be politicised, as happens all too often?

Sajid Javid: I agree, but a decision on whether an issue is politicised cannot be taken by just one side of the House. This is an important point, and it is worth reminding ourselves that after the wrongs done to the Windrush generation were first discovered, a review of historical cases over the summer showed that almost half those cases in which people suffered detriment took place under the previous Labour Government. Since then, there has been a much more co-operative approach across the House. I think that that is what the public want to see, and it is what they would want to see in this case as well.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A compassionate immigration system is, above all, an efficient immigration system, so I welcome the review my right hon. Friend is carrying out. Will he, however, commit that in the new immigration system, which will of course apply to far more people once we have left the European Union, he will make the case for using DNA to speed up applications, because that can be very much in the interests of applicants?

Sajid Javid: That is an important point. I think it is already the situation that where someone chooses to provide DNA evidence, it generally speeds up their case, because DNA is pretty straightforward to analyse and to make a determination about compared with cases involving paperwork that sometimes goes back and forth between the applicant and the Home Office. In cases where people choose to do this, the matter should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement that he will review the immigration system. Can he assure the House that concerns raised in cases from across the
United Kingdom will be taken into account when forming these new structures to ensure that our new policies and system will provide not only clarity, but consistency across the UK.

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend is right. As we review our immigration system and consider any changes, it is crucial that they will apply clearly and uniformly in exactly the same way throughout the United Kingdom.

**Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con):** It is 34 years since Dr Alec Jeffreys pioneered the use of DNA fingerprinting at Leicester University, which we in the UK should be incredibly proud of. Can the Minister assure me that that will continue to be an option for settling immigration cases?

**Sajid Javid:** I can assure my hon. Friend that when someone makes the choice for themselves to provide biometric details or evidence, such as through DNA fingerprinting, we should absolutely take that into account, not least to help them with their case.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**Fisheries Bill**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Secretary Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Dominic Raab, Dr Secretary Fox, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns and Secretary Karen Bradley, presented a Bill to make provision about policy objectives in relation to fisheries, fishing and aquaculture; to make provision about access to British fisheries; to make provision about the recovery of costs in respect of the exercise of public functions relating to fish or fishing; to confer powers to make further provision in connection with fisheries, aquaculture or aquatic animals; to make provision about byelaws and orders relating to the exploitation of sea fisheries; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 278) with explanatory notes (Bill 278-EN).*

**Folic Acid Fortification**

12.59 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered folic acid fortification.

This week is Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week, so it seems fitting to be having this debate today. The House will have heard the Minister with responsibility for public health, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), announce during Health questions on Tuesday that the Government are launching a public consultation in early 2019 on the proposal to add folic acid to flour. This issue has attracted wide interest from a large group of stakeholders, and it is important that we properly consult on the proposal, to ensure that all people have an opportunity to register their views. We will be encouraging people to take part in the consultation.

**Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con):** During his speech, will the Minister tell the House why the Government have apparently ruled out a publicity campaign to encourage those who are at risk to take folic acid supplements and are instead proposing this mass medication?

**Nigel Adams:** We will be encouraging all stakeholders, as well as the public, to take part in the consultation. I will certainly look into the matter that my right hon. Friend has raised and ensure that someone writes to him.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** Given the evidence that neural tube defects such as spina bifida emerge between the 18th and the 28th day after conception and that most women are not taking folic acid supplements in accordance with the Government’s guidelines before conception or during their first trimester, does the Minister agree that supplementation alone does not work?

**Nigel Adams:** The hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in this matter and has done some extraordinary work on it. He makes an important point. This is why awareness is crucial for all women of childbearing age, including those who are not pregnant but might be considering becoming pregnant.

**Will Quince (Colchester) (Con):** I recall that we did not know our first child was on the way until 22 weeks; we were not particularly planning to have a baby. It is not always easy to foresee these eventualities. Will the Minister take into consideration the fact that not everyone can prepare for eventualities that they are not expecting?

**Nigel Adams:** My hon. Friend makes a perfectly plausible point from personal experience. Not everyone can see into the future and plan accordingly. A large number of pregnancies are unplanned, so I understand his point.

**Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** Will the Minister give way?
Nigel Adams: I will. I will get past my second paragraph at some point.

Rebecca Pow: When I was pregnant with my third child, I took folic acid supplements and ate lots of green vegetables, which contain folic acid. However, as colleagues have said, many people do not know that they are pregnant early enough to start doing that. Also, they might not have received the right advice from the medical profession. This consultation is important on those grounds, but will my hon. Friend also ensure that it is very wide ranging so that consideration can be given to all aspects, including the appropriate safeguarding of voluntary fortification by the food industry? Will consideration be given to coeliacs, who use gluten-free flour? This has to be a very comprehensive consultation if it is to be effective.

Nigel Adams: It does; my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. A number of foods already contain folic acid, and the consultation will have to take that into consideration. It will also look into what a safe upper limit is in that regard. This is why we want to ensure that the consultation is as thorough as possible.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is being extremely generous in giving way; we are not allowing him to make much progress. May I take it from his last assertion about an upper limit that the consultation, which we welcome, is not so much about whether folic acid will be included in flour but about what the upper limit will be?

Nigel Adams: I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the consultation, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would not expect me to do so. It will have to take an upper limit into consideration; indeed, that will be an incredibly important part of the consultation. We want to ensure that the consultation is properly done, that it is thorough and that it can advise Ministers. We will be coming back to the House to report back on it.

I shall move on, if that is okay with colleagues. I think from the tone of the debate thus far that the announcement has been well received. We will be properly consulting on and considering all aspects of this very important issue. I note that many colleagues are well aware of the reason behind the calls for mandatory fortification, but it might be helpful to summarise again what we are trying to prevent. Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord. They happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows that she is pregnant. The two most common neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. These are devastating conditions, and the Government are fully aware of their effect on the individuals themselves and their families. We have already heard the acute interest and strength of feeling on this issue from Members of this House and in the other place, including on what can be done to ensure that pregnant women have healthy pregnancies and give their unborn babies the best protection during the crucial early weeks of development.

Unless someone is pregnant or thinking of having a baby, they should be able to get all the folate they need by eating a varied and balanced diet. Existing pregnancy advice to women who are trying to conceive or who are likely to become pregnant is that they should take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) referred. Examples are spinach and broccoli, as well as foods voluntarily fortified with folic acid, including a wide range of breakfast cereals.

We know, however, that around half the pregnancies in the UK are unplanned. In those that are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers took folic acid supplements or modified their diet to increase folate intake. This has led to calls for the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid so that women can get it from dietary sources other than foods that naturally contain it. Successive Governments have not considered that mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to be the best way to protect public health and have instead promoted the use of folic acid supplements as a part of a wide range of pre-conception and post-conception advice to women of childbearing age. However, we are now taking the opportunity that this consultation presents to seek the public’s opinion on this proposed important change.

My colleague the Minister with responsibility for public health responded to a Westminster Hall debate in May 2018 that was secured by the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. In his response, the Minister confirmed that the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—I shall refer to it as COT from now on—had agreed to take forward for further consideration the issue of tolerable upper limits for folate. COT published its interim conclusions in July 2018, but it has yet to finalise its detailed review. In summary, COT concluded that the potential masking of pernicious anaemia was still an appropriate and relevant endpoint on which to base a tolerable upper level, but that the level at which this effect started to occur was unclear. It concluded that further analysis of the data was necessary, but that the upper level would not decrease—that is, it would stay at 1 microgram a day or could be increased—as there was no convincing evidence that masking occurred at levels of intake below 1 microgram a day.

COT has discussed this again at this week’s meeting, and as soon as the outcome of its consideration becomes available, it will inform Ministers’ thinking in respect of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition’s recommendations on the mandatory fortification of flour and about folic acid advice generally. We will reflect that outcome in the consultation document, together with whether we need to take any other action, such as discussions with the industry on removing folic acid from products that are currently voluntarily fortified, such as breakfast cereal. We will also be working closely with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the consultation, its responses and any resulting conclusions.

Rebecca Pow: It goes without saying that it would be worth examining the results of tackling anaemia by fortifying flour with iron and of tackling tooth decay by putting fluoride in toothpaste. Similar things have been influenced by approaches to general health, and we could learn great lessons from such examples.
Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is be research and evidence in these areas from around the world, and we hope that it will feature in the consultation. We certainly need to learn from the approaches taken elsewhere.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am grateful to the Minister for what he is saying and warmly welcome the announcement made by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), on Tuesday. It is a tremendous step forward. As for looking at what has happened across the world, well over 85 countries, including the United States, have mandatory fortification of flour, so there is an awful lot of evidence out there, and clearly it should be taken into account.

Nigel Adams: It certainly will. The right hon. Gentleman takes a keen in this area, and other countries such as the United States, as he mentioned, Canada and Australia have introduced mandatory fortification. We need to learn from all that, but we also need to understand the dietary habits of the United Kingdom. It is worth mentioning that no EU country currently has mandatory folic acid fortification, but he is right and we will certainly be learning from the experiences elsewhere.

I assure the House that Ministers have always taken the issue of pre and post-conception advice seriously, and the public consultation will allow us to fully explore the fortification of flour. This is the start of a detailed dialogue with the industry, the general public, relevant charities—I thank Shine, which has done so much campaigning in this area—and members of the scientific community. This Government will ensure that the decisions we take will come after the full consideration of all views. It is my pleasure to introduce this important debate, and I look forward to hearing the contributions and views of Members.

1.12 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank the Government for allowing time for this important and very timely debate. It is a pleasure to be here responding on behalf of the Opposition on World Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Day, as the Minister pointed out, to speak about folic acid fortification, particularly after the announcement by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), earlier this week that the Government will be consulting on fortifying flour with folic acid. After decades of campaigning, I know that the announcement has been welcomed by campaigners and their families, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontyprrid (Owen Smith) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for their tireless campaigning on this issue. I too welcome the announcement although I have some further questions, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could elaborate on them later.

As early as 1991, the Medical Research Council published a report recommending that white flour in the UK should be fortified with folic acid, which had been shown in other countries to prevent neural tube defects in foetuses. Similarly, mandatory fortification, with limits on voluntary supplementation, was backed by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition in 2006 and again in 2017. Why, then, has it taken successive Governments so long to get to this point? The latest national diet and nutrition survey statistics state that 91% of women of childbearing age have a red blood cell folate level below the level estimated to lower the risk of NTDs. It is therefore clear that more needs to be done. In fact, the Public Health and Primary Care Minister said during Health and Social Care questions this week that he was “convinced that the evidence shows overwhelmingly that this is something we should be doing.”—[Official Report, 23 October 2018, Vol. 648, c. 135.]

I therefore wonder about the purpose of the consultation.

The Minister may have already answered some of my questions, but is the consultation about seeing whether flour should be fortified with folic acid or is it just about establishing what the upper limit for folate levels should be? Modelling undertaken by Food Standards Scotland in 2017 indicated that fortification at the recommended levels, with a capping of voluntary fortification and supplements, can achieve the reductions in NTD risk without increasing the number of people consuming the upper recommended limit. Is this a scenario that the consultation will consider? Up until now, the Government have continued their policy of voluntary folic acid supplementation for women of childbearing age. Does the Minister expect that advice to continue throughout the consultation and evaluation period?

The press release published this week by the Department of Health and Social Care says that the consultation “will launch in early 2019”.

Is the Minister able to tell the House exactly when the consultation will launch and how long it is expected to last? The evidence has been available for decades, and people have been campaigning on this issue for many years, so it seems only right that the consultation should conclude as quickly as possible. With that in mind, does the Minister have any expectations of when we will have the results of the consultation? Finally, as the Minister will know, not everyone eats bread or is able to eat wheat flour, so will the consultation make any assessment of how we reach those who do not eat bread or wheat flour? Will the fortification include only wheat flour, or will it extend to other flours, such as corn, rice and gluten-free flour?

That is a lot of questions for the Minister to answer, especially as it is not his brief—he is doing a fabulous job of stepping into various areas across Government—and I am sure that colleagues across the House will have further questions for him, but as this change has been such a long time coming, we are very keen to get an answer to the key question: when will flour be fortified with folic acid in the UK? I look forward to this debate and to hearing the Minister’s answers at the end.

1.17 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It seems that a lot of us are substituting for other people today, but it is nice to speak in a debate on a topic on which there is a little consensus and agreement for a change, so I welcome the Government making time for this debate and the announcement about the fortification of flour with folic acid. It is particularly appropriate, as the Minister said, to be holding this debate on World Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Day. As the hon. Member...
for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, this change has been a long time coming—the Medical Research Council first called for it in 1991—so I hope that the consultation will be concluded as quickly as possible so that we can move to an implementation phase.

Since 1991, the evidence of the benefits of folic acid fortification has only increased to the point at which there is now clear consensus across the medical community and about the importance of this step. Dr Linda de Caestecker, public health director of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and Dr Jonathan Sher, an independent consultant on pre-conception health, education and care based in Edinburgh, have both written and campaigned extensively on this issue. In February this year, they published a paper in which they said that folic acid, or vitamin B9, could accurately be described as “vitamin benign” given its strong benefits and lack of significant downsides. They also pointed to the important fact that the lack of fortification has led to a health inequality gap, saying in a recent edition of *Holyrood* magazine:

“Relatively well-educated, well-informed, well-off women tend to follow the advice”—

to take supplements before and during pregnancy—

“while their less advantaged sisters often do not. The gap has also grown between women with well-planned and well-timed pregnancies and the large percentage of Scottish women who become pregnant unintentionally, unexpectedly, or with minimal preparation.”

The challenge is particularly acute in Scotland, which has more live births of babies with spina bifida per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. In turn, as the Minister hinted at, the UK rate is higher than that in many other parts of the world where fortification has already been introduced. Over 70 countries have already adopted this practice and have seen a decline in neural tube defects as a result. That is one of the reasons why last year the Scottish Public Health Minister, my good friend—and now the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government—Aileen Campbell, along with her Welsh Assembly counterpart, wrote to ask the then Secretary of State for Health to move forward on fortification.

The Scottish Government have also made it clear that they are prepared to take their own steps on fortification if necessary, but the evidence and research mentioned by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West shows that fortification will be more effective if it is rolled out at the same time across the whole UK. It is welcome that action is at last being taken. The focus of the consultation must therefore be on how fortification can be delivered effectively, not on whether it should be implemented in the first place. I echo some of the hon. Lady’s questions.

When the announcement was trailed earlier this month, the chief executive of Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland, Andy Wynd, said that the decision to proceed with fortifying flour with folic acid will have a monumental impact on the health of babies in Scotland. I pay tribute to the work of SBHS and other organisations, such as Shine and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which have long campaigned on this issue and which provided helpful briefings in advance of today’s debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) works very closely with SBHS, which is based in his constituency. SBHS does incredible work to raise awareness of spina bifida and to support people and families with the condition to live happy and fulfilling lives. On that note, I wish the best of luck to my friend, and former constituent, Tommy Ga-Ken Wan who, with his dancing partner Piotr Marczak, is taking part in SBHS’s “Strictly Come Prancing” event in Glasgow later this month, which will raise much needed funds and awareness—as does the annual SBHS gala Burns supper, which I had the privilege of attending in 2016.

I attended that Burns supper with another constituent, Jackie Lennox, whose sister Tracy was born with spina bifida. Tracy sadly passed away in 2014—as we have heard, spina bifida is a life-limiting condition—and in her memory Jackie established Tracy’s tree, which has become a new but much loved tradition in Maryhill. The memorial Christmas tree outside the burgh halls is decorated each year with baubles bearing the names of loved ones who have passed away.

It is difficult to know how Tracy’s life, and many others, might have been different if the fortification of flour with folic acid had already been routine, but what we do know is that the introduction of fortification will reduce cases of neural tube defects and complicated pregnancies and will allow more babies and families to live longer and less complicated lives. That is why it is important that the Government now move as quickly as possible to take these last steps towards implementation. We must make sure we take this opportunity to finally make it, and get it, right.
Obviously there will be some controversial questions. The Government are proposing a big public health intervention, and it is right that they are consulting, but the Public Health Minister was right to say on Tuesday that the evidence is overwhelming and that he is convinced by the evidence.

I will spell out the scale and gravity of these conditions in the UK to bring it home to Members, and to those who might read or watch this debate. We now all know that neural tube defects are the failure of the spine to close at either end, and they happen early in pregnancy. Neural tube defects can lead either to spina bifida or anencephaly.

Anencephaly occurs in 40% of neural tube defects and is fatal. Children with anencephaly do not survive, and often they die very quickly after birth. Spina bifida is where the spinal cord does not properly form, which obviously leads to poor mobility, poor bladder control, bowel issues, often learning disabilities, mental health problems, physical health problems and lifelong disability. It is an extremely grave condition.

Neural tube defects affect around 1,000 pregnancies each year in our country. In this country, two foetuses a day are aborted following the diagnosis of a neural tube defect, and two children a week are born with such birth defects.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful case, for which I am grateful. Does he agree that one of the most frightening statistics is that young women under the age of 20 are five times less likely to take folic acid supplements? That strengthens the case for mandatory flour fortification.

Owen Smith: From memory, I believe that just 6% of women aged under 20 supplement their diet prior to or, indeed, during pregnancy. It is clear that this particularly affects younger women, perhaps because they have not yet read the literature, gone to classes or otherwise been informed. The other reality is that there is a much lower level of folate among women from working-class and black and ethnic minority backgrounds, which is another fundamental reason for addressing this in the manner proposed.

Shine estimates that the cost of caring for people with spina bifida and other neural tube defects is around £500,000 over their lifetime, but the point is not the financial cost to the NHS or to the taxpayer; the human cost to families and individuals is what counts. In this awareness week for spina bifida and hydrocephaly, Shine has been highlighting some of those human examples.

One example is of a young woman called Nicky, who had spina bifida. She could walk a little, but she used a wheelchair most of the time. She loved animals, and she volunteered at a local animal sanctuary and rode at weekends. At 18, before she intended to start a university degree in animal care, the shunt that controlled her hydrocephalus needed replacing. It went wrong, and she had three dreadful years of ill health during which she was largely housebound or hospitalised. She obviously could not continue with her education, and she died at 21.

That is not an uncommon case; unfortunately, it is all too common. There is no certainty, of course, that had Nicky’s mother supplemented her diet prior to conception, or indeed during pregnancy, Nicky would not have been born with spina bifida. However, we have known for almost 30 years of the clear evidence that there is a dramatically greater likelihood that Nicky would have been born without a neural tube defect had her mother had the requisite levels of folate in her system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, it was in 1991 that the Medical Research Council first published the evidence showing a 72% reduction in the likelihood of conceiving a child with a neural tube defect if the mother supplements her diet with folic acid.

The history is interesting, because successive Governments have not responded to the evidence with fortification, on which this Government are now consulting. I make it clear that I think the last Labour Government should have done so. We did a huge amount through bold public health interventions. Smoking cessation is the best example, but there are myriad examples. The last Labour Government were very good at addressing public health needs. However, this is one area where they did not undertake to act and they should have done. The position our Government and successive Governments took was to move towards advice that diets should be supplemented with 400 micrograms of folic acid during and prior to pregnancy. As many people have said, the problem is that 40% of pregnancies are unplanned; only 30% of women take the right dose of folic acid even if they are supplementing; young women tend not to supplement at all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said; and working-class women and women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds have lower levels of folate because they do not supplement very often. Across the whole population, irrespective of demography, about 75% of women do not have the right levels of folate and therefore are at increased risk of giving birth to a child with a neural tube defect.

Other countries have been bolder than us. As the right hon. Member for Belfast North said, about 85 countries have chosen to introduce mandatory fortification, including America, Canada, South Africa and lots of countries in South America. It has not happened in Europe, but this will be another example of Britain leading the way in Europe.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend has shown great leadership on this issue, and Shine has been a fantastic help to campaigners across the country on this issue. Does he agree that families in south Wales are glad the Government are moving on this but that they want this consultation to be completed much more quickly—as quickly as possible—because they think this important public health initiative should be brought in sooner rather than later?

Owen Smith: That is right. I understand why the Government need to consult. There has been a debate about the upper level of folate. As I may discuss briefly later, the evidence suggests that there is not necessarily any issue associated with an upper tolerable limit. A recent paper in January last year by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald, who did the original research in the early 1990s, very effectively debunked the notion that there is an upper tolerable level of folate. Other studies have done the same, but I am confident that that will come out in
the consultation. The point my hon. Friend makes about families in his south Wales constituency and mine is well made. To illustrate that, using the 72% statistic, let me say that had the Labour Government introduced this measure in 1998, at the same time as the United States did, 3,000 babies would have been saved from being born with spina bifida or anencephaly.

There is no evidence from countries across the world that have undertaken this measure of ill effects in the population. There is lots of evidence to show that there are other ancillary benefits; one study in Norway has shown a diminution in the volume of autism in the population. There is huge scientific support for this measure, including from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Midwives; the British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society; the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare; the British Dietetic Association; the Governments of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; the chief medical officers in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland; Public Health England; Public Health Wales; the Food Standards Agency; and Professor Sir Colin Blakemore. The list goes on and on. Crucially, the Government’s Standards Agency; and Professor Sir Colin Blakemore. The list goes on and on. Crucially, the Government’s own Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition has advocated this measure for the best part of 20 years. So it is a measure whose time has come. It will be enormously beneficial for our population, and if we in this House undertake to do it, we will contribute to saving hundreds of lives each year and thousands of lives over the years to come. I commend the Government for having the bravery and foresight to do it.

1.34 pm

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) in this debate because, as has been mentioned, he co-chairs the all-party group and has done a fantastic job in raising awareness of the issue in a relatively short time. It is not that long since the all-party group was set up, so this must be something of a record in getting the Government to move. I thank the Minister for what he has said and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is the Minister responsible for public health, for what he said on Tuesday and for the speed with which he has moved on the issue. Many, many people have been involved in highlighting it over the years, and I join the tributes that have already been paid. The hon. Member for Pontypridd read out the list of scientific bodies, clinicians and others who are all agreed about the need to proceed along this path. Therefore, I, too, join the call that this should not be a long, drawn out consultation, as ample evidence is already available on the issue. The consultation should be proceeded with as quickly as possible to ensure that this is introduced, and I make the plea that it should be introduced across the UK. We had a debate yesterday about Northern Ireland, and I do not want to get into all of that, but on this issue the Government have taken steps to introduce sensible, non-controversial measures where appropriate.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned the high incidence in Scotland and we have a high incidence in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely right to make that point and I congratulate the Scottish Government on what they have done on the issue, but we cannot allow some kind of interregnum in Northern Ireland. This issue is important and I think that there would be absolute consensus across the board in Northern Ireland that any change should happen there alongside the rest of the United Kingdom.

The effects of these conditions on the children who are born with them are extreme. I have spoken previously about my own son, Andrew, who was born in 1990 with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and about the severe impact that had on his life. As he grew older, there were more severe effects. Of course, that did not just affect him. He was a bright, cheerful boy and a lovely child. The lives of those who came into contact with him were enriched, and our lives were certainly enriched by having him. It had severe effects on him—he was hospitalised many times and had shunt operations and setbacks—and there was also an effect on the wider family. It affected
the entire family circle. We had great family back-up and support, but in many cases people do not have that. This is a really massive issue, and that is where charities such as Shine and others come into play, providing such fantastic support, help and assistance.

If it can be prevented, why are we not taking the steps that need to be taken? Andrew had eight years of a wonderful life, in the sense that he was loved and gave out so much love, but the problems that he had and faced throughout that short life were very, very difficult for him and for the rest of his family. We would love to see children being born without having to have these conditions. They do not need to. We now have to move on with this issue. There is no good reason not to. Some abstract arguments may be advanced and some theoretical arguments made about liberty, mass medication and other things, but they have been clearly disproved—they are a total red herring. Folic acid fortification is something that can be done that is safe and that works. It will not prevent these conditions entirely—some children will still be born with them—but there will be a lot fewer, so we need to move forward.

I welcome what the Government have done. They have listened and responded. Let us now get on with it. I pay tribute to everyone who has been involved in the campaign and got it to this stage. The political agenda is dominated by certain subjects but, if nothing else happens, if we can get this done, it will be a great legacy for this Government and this Parliament.

1.43 pm  

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for initially asking the Backbench Business Committee for this debate. When time could not be allocated, the Government allowed for this time instead, so I thank them, too. I thank my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for their tireless campaigning. I was moved to speak in the debate because of my hon. Friend’s presentation at the Backbench Business Committee, of which I am a member. This whole issue seems like such a no-brainer, so I am really pleased that the Government have come forward with a consultation. I echo the comments of Members who want the consultation to happen quickly so that we can get measures in place.

In preparation for this debate, I went to Holland & Barrett to find out the cost of folic acid tablets. Just one jar costs £8.49. Being pregnant is an expensive business, as is having children. As well as folic acid pills—if someone is aware of their pregnancy or intends to become pregnant—there are baby clothes, decorations, cots and car seats to buy, and all that at a time when many people have very little money and are just about managing. Do we really expect those families to spend £8.49 on supplements?

Although supplements are costly, treating illnesses caused by the lack of folic acid in the diet of expectant mothers costs the NHS far more. Studies show that adding folic acid to food reduces instances of neural tube defects by 72%. That is exceedingly significant when we consider the fact that hundreds of babies are affected by spina bifida every year in the UK. Researchers in Chile compared the annual cost of the rehabilitation and treatment of children with spina bifida with the cost of adding folic acid to flour. The results showed that for every $1 invested in adding folic acid to flour, $12 was saved in medical treatment and care. Adding folic acid to our flour will not only benefit the children suffering from neural tube defects, but save significant amounts for the NHS and therefore the taxpayer. It is estimated that it would cost only £200,000 a year for us to add folic acid to flour, and there are only 10 major flour mills in the country. It could be done very easily and very quickly.

Of course, there is a small minority of people who do not like mass measures such as the fortification of foods, but food fortification is nothing new and already makes an important contribution to diets in the UK and overseas. In the UK we already fortify white and brown flour with iron, thiamin and niacin after they are removed with the bran during the milling of wheat, so the relevant technology and infrastructure is already in the UK industry. We add other substances to food for flavour, for texture or to increase the speed of production, so why would we not add a harmless ingredient, for which there is no upper limit, that could save hundreds of babies a year from being born in the UK with lifelong birth defects?

Having children is an incredibly exciting time for parents—full of hope and expectation—but it is also fraught with risk and concern. Pregnant women and expectant parents are bombarded with information about diseases and issues that can afflict the mother and the baby. If we can do one simple, cheap and effective thing to reduce the chances of a baby contracting a life-changing illness, surely it is a no-brainer.

1.47 pm  

**Mrs Hodgson:** With the leave of the House, I wish to say what an excellent debate this has been. I thank the Members who have taken part: the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) in particular for his very moving speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We really have heard excellent and moving speeches. Most Members present were in Westminster Hall for the debate in May when together we called on the Government to look again at this issue. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), did listen. He assured us all when we were lobbying him on the way out that he had listened. He told us to watch this space, so it is really good that within six months we are back, that we are all in agreement that there are benefits to fortifying flour with folic acid, and that we are keen to have that happen as soon as possible.

As we have heard, charities such as Shine, from which I have received very detailed and helpful briefings, have been campaigning on this issue for decades, and I pay tribute to Lord Rooker, who has also shown great leadership on this matter over decades. Will the Minister say whether charities and campaigners will have an opportunity to be involved with and to engage in the consultation? How will they be able to do that? Many of them have not only first-hand experience of why fortification is needed, but the expertise that should be utilised during the consultation. My last question, I promise, is:
will the Minister please tell the House, if the information is available, which Department is facilitating the consultation and who it will be led by?

After this issue has been on the table for two and a half decades, we all agree that it is now time for our flour to be fortified with folic acid. I look forward to hearing the Minister outline the timeframe in his closing speech.

1.49 pm

Nigel Adams: With the leave of the House, I echo the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) in saying that we have had a fantastic well-informed debate. It is good to see the House coming together. I am sure that everyone will agree that the tone of the debate has been extremely welcome. We have heard Members’ views about the proposal to fortify flour with folic acid, and I thank all of them for their contributions and interventions. This will ensure that the consultation document reflects both the scientific evidence base and the very personal impacts of the consequences for families dealing with an NTD birth. What has been clear from the debate is that we must move forward on this issue as soon as possible.

On modelling, the Government will consider all current dietary habits of women of childbearing age to help to inform the impact of this proposed mandatory fortification of flour to ensure that we are reaching the desired outcome. All dietary patterns will be considered whether they be cultural, religious or just personal preference.

On safety, we will continue to listen to COT’s advice to ensure that a safe upper limit is not exceeded by proposed changes to the folate intake from fortified flour. I hear what the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) says, but we have a duty to listen to COT’s advice. On pre and post-conception advice, we will ensure that a clear public health message is provided so that young women can properly understand what this proposed fortification change means for them having a healthy pregnancy.

Let me refer to some of the contributions to the debate. I thank the hon. Members for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) for their interventions, and also the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who spoke in such an informed way. I really need to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Pontypridd for his work as co-chair of the all-party group on folic fortification and for highlighting those individual cases that he referenced. In particular, there was that incredibly moving story of the young girl, Nicky, which must have touched everyone here. As a Department, we are incredibly grateful for all the work that he has done. He, like the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, was right to reference the work of Lord Rooker. We are extremely grateful for what he has done in this area and for his campaign on folic fortification.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) speaks eloquently and brilliantly on all issues in this House. It has been a great privilege to listen to his contributions over the past eight years, but particularly in this debate. To come to this Chamber and to speak on a personal level about his experiences must have been incredibly challenging, and the way in which he talked about his son, Andrew, was incredibly moving. Both he and the hon. Member for Pontypridd, as co-chairs of the all-party group, should be very proud of their work to get the Government to this stage. I am absolutely sure that Andrew would be incredibly proud of his father’s work.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) rightly highlighted the costs— the relatively small costs—involved in this area. That is a great reminder to the Government that this is an issue that is not particularly expensive to deal with. There are not that many flour mills around the country, as he said. I am very grateful to him for his contribution.

I turn now to the comments of my friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, whom I have had the great privilege of working with on various campaigns over the years in this place. She asked exactly when the consultation would be launched and how long it would last. I know that other Members will want to know that as well. We do not have an exact date today in the House, but I can assure Members that we are committed to no delay and to responding as quickly as possible on this very important matter.

The hon. Lady also asked whether the consultation would consider the fortification of flour, or whether it would just establish an upper limit. I can assure her that the consultation will consider whether the calls to fortify wheat flour will achieve the objective for pregnant women. COT is considering the safe upper levels as part of that and its conclusions will be reflected within the wider consultation. She asked which Department will be responsible for leading the consultation, and I can tell her that it will be the Department of Health and Social Care. She also asked about gluten-free flour and whether fortification will include just wheat flour, or other types of flour such as cornflour for those with coeliac disease. We will consider all food in the modelling to ensure that the policy reaches its objective. We will also discuss with industry the issue of foods that are currently voluntarily fortified, such as breakfast cereal.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked how charities such as Shine can support the Government in ensuring that the announced consultation progresses quickly. We are very grateful to Shine and other charities for their tireless promotion of this important issue. Until we know the outcome of the consultation, it is too soon to consider which legislative vehicle might be needed to give effect to any decision, but the consultation process will allow us to make a decision once we have that outcome.

We very much hope that the consultation will raise public awareness of the need to continue to take the recommended folic acid supplement before conception and up to the 12th week of pregnancy. That is vital, as we have heard, and I really hope that this message can be brought to the attention of women both now and in respect of any future change. I am confident that this public consultation will give a proper channel to allow
everyone to make their feelings on this issue known. I am sure that everyone who has participated in the debate will very much look forward to its outcome.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered folic acid fortification.

Inclusive Transport Strategy

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Women and Equalities Committee on 10 October, on Disability and the built environment, HC 1471.]

1.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the inclusive transport strategy.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce this important debate today on an issue that will affect us all at some point in our lives. As I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will know, about one in five people in the UK are disabled. We also have an ageing society, and, as people get older, they are more likely to experience a wide range of conditions such as mobility impairments, memory loss, or visual or hearing impairments. As a society, we are also increasingly recognising that not all disabilities are visible and that mental health conditions and cognitive impairments, as well as hearing loss and memory loss, can have just as profound an impact on people as physical disabilities.

Regardless of the nature of a person’s disability, they should have the same access to transport and opportunity to travel as everyone else—access to services that most of us take for granted day in, day out. Accessible transport helps to reduce social isolation and loneliness, as well as to create opportunities for disabled people to play a more active role in society. Disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people, and the Government have a manifesto commitment to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027. Disabled people might face many barriers to finding employment, but the ability simply to travel should not be one. Against this backdrop, I am proud to have been the Minister responsible for publishing the Government’s inclusive transport strategy in July. I thank the Department for Transport’s accessibility team for all their hard work; the sector, which we have worked with; and the disability groups, including the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, that helped and advised us.

The inclusive transport strategy followed an earlier consultation on a draft accessibility action plan that received over 1,000 responses. I thank the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—I hope that I pronounced his constituency correctly—for the substantial work that he undertook while he was responsible for the accessibility action plan in the Department for Transport. The accessibility action plan was an extensive engagement programme and represented a number of disability groups, whose voices were taken on board.

Let me remind the House briefly of the main elements of the inclusive transport strategy. First, the word “inclusive” is important, as it signals that we are adopting a holistic approach, rather than simply focusing on the physical accessibility of our infrastructure. This is about much more than simply ensuring that stations have step-free access. It is about designing and implementing all our policies and operations in such a way that they genuinely work for everyone. That is what we mean by inclusive.

The strategy starts off by setting a vision, which is that the Government want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else and to be able
to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. Its overall goal is to create a transport system that offers equal access for disabled people by 2030. We chose that date because it links to the UN sustainable development goals for that year, particularly the goal to provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all. We also took account of the fact that, with the best will in the world, although there is much that we can do quickly—and we will work at a pace—some of the ambitious changes that we want to make will just take time. Some of our infrastructure, for example, was built at a time when accessibility was not taken as seriously as it is today; in fact, it was not considered at all. I am thinking particularly of many of our smaller railway stations, including those in my own constituency, which do not have step-free access. Matters requiring new legislation will also inevitably take time.

Having set the vision and overall goal, the strategy then sets out a larger number of measures under five main themes, which I will briefly summarise. First, it says that we will do more to promote passenger rights and ensure that existing legislation is better enforced. That matters because one very strong message that emerged from the consultation was that, although lots of legislation is already in force, not everyone is always aware of it and it certainly is not always enforced. For example, I am sure that hon. Members have heard many stories of blind people being charged extra for taking guide dogs in taxis or of taxi drivers not stopping to pick them up at all. That sort of behaviour is unacceptable. It is also illegal, but that is not widely enough understood and it is not consistently enforced. That is why we will be launching a public awareness campaign next year, working with a wide range of disability partners to raise awareness of disabled passengers’ rights when using the transport system.

The second theme of this strategy is the need for better staff training. We are talking about not just frontline staff such as bus drivers, railway station staff and so on, but also back office staff and managers. Training has to be top down as well as bottom up. This is important because the attitudes of staff can make a huge difference to the journey experiences of disabled people. This can be what makes or breaks a journey and builds or damages the confidence of a disabled passenger.

I am committed to improving staff awareness across the transport sector. Next year, we will publish guidance to improve bus driver awareness training on disability issues. We will also develop a monitoring and enforcement framework for this training, which will include identifying a body to ensure compliance across the bus sector. In the rail sector, bidders in future franchise competitions will be required to commit to providing enhanced disability training for staff, covering a range of impairments, including less visible disabilities. We will also require bidders to commit to involving disabled people in the design and delivery of that training. Involving disabled people directly in the provision of training is essential. It will help to ensure that transport staff fully understand the diversity of disability and the importance of providing good customer service, also enabling them to take some responsibility for the passenger not just on their part of the railway or the station, but for the onward journey.

The strategy’s third theme is a need for better information. Having the right information in an accessible format is an essential part of making it easier for people to travel. Of course, this benefits not just disabled people, but everyone else. By accessible information, I mean everything from providing audiovisual information on buses to including clear and simple signage in places such as railway stations that works for people with difficulties with communication, understanding or memory. Audiovisual information on buses is another tool that can make all the difference to someone’s experience of a journey. The Department is taking forward the necessary legislation to ensure that this is rolled out across all bus services. We are providing £2 million of funding to help speed this up and make it more affordable, particularly for small companies.

Accessible information is not only about audiovisual information. Improvements to real-time information can also make a difference to someone’s confidence to travel. Real-time information can alert people to changes on their journey or enable them to update their assistance requirements. That is why, as part of the strategy, we are supporting the Rail Delivery Group as it trials a new Passenger Assist application. This application will, for the first time, enable disabled passengers to book and change their assistance requirements digitally and receive updates on their journey in real time. I am challenging the Rail Delivery Group to present a mobile system—preferably an app—that will reduce the amount of time it takes to pre-book a journey, making it as easy as possible for disabled people.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Anything that improves the quality of disabled people’s experience of passenger assistance is very valuable, but should not the goal be to turn up and go—for someone with a disability to be able to use public transport in just the same way as you or I, without having to make a pre-planned journey? They should simply be able to use the facilities of course the aim is for people to be able to turn up and go. More readily available information will benefit us all, including those with disabilities and those requiring physical assistance. We also want to ensure that we are covering other less visible disabilities such as autism and hearing loss.

Ms Ghani: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, who is an expert in this area, as she chairs the Select Committee on Transport. The goal is that every passenger, regardless of their disability, can turn up and go—just as able-bodied people can—but we have to accept that, in some circumstances, some bookings might need to happen in advance, especially when the journeys involve a variety of transport such as buses, taxis and other sorts of mobility. We hope that Passenger Assist can enable those journeys to be dealt with from start to finish, but of course the aim is for people to be able to turn up and go. More readily available information will benefit us all, including those with disabilities and those requiring physical assistance. We also want to ensure that we are covering other less visible disabilities such as autism and hearing loss.

The fourth theme in the strategy is about ensuring that our infrastructure is genuinely accessible to all. By infrastructure, I mean not only the public realm—stations, bus stations or streets—but also our trains, buses, taxis, boats and planes. The strategy included some significant new commitments under this theme. First, it confirmed that the Government would provide up to £300 million of funding over the period to 2024 to improve the accessibility of our rail network under the Access for
All programme. This is an area of considerable interest for many hon. Members, and it was the subject of a Westminster Hall debate earlier this month. I have also written to all hon. Members to explain how the funding works and what needs to be done if they would like a station to be included in the programme.

Secondly, the strategy included the announcement that the Government would ask local authorities to pause any shared-space schemes that they are considering. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for the work that she and the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, have done to review disability and the built environment, particularly for its recommendation with regard to shared-space schemes. The Committee’s recommendations and the feedback provided by many stakeholder groups informed our decision.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Minister has touched on the really important issue of shared spaces. I am pleased to see that the strategy calls for a halt to any further new shared-space developments, but there is a problem with existing shared spaces. Can she confirm whether there will be funding for local authorities to make those shared spaces accessible and not no-go areas for blind and partially sighted people?

Ms Ghani: This is a very important issue on which I gave evidence to the Committee just a few weeks ago. People’s interpretations of shared spaces are varied. There is no agreement, even within the community that lobbies for people with visual health problems, on what the minimum size of a pavement should be. That is why we will undertake a consultation with Transport Scotland to get some data on what works and what definitely does not work so that we can update our guidance by the end of next year.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): We, too, have a problem with shared spaces, particularly outside a local primary school. Will the Minister ensure that the needs not only of people with disabilities but of smaller and older people in our communities are included in the consultation so that all voices can be heard? Many of us are very worried about these shared-space ideas.

Ms Ghani: That is an incredibly valuable point. When talking about shared spaces, we may think about those who are using wheelchairs or those with visual health problems, but not about mums or parents with buggies, let alone older people. That is why the interpretation of shared spaces is so varied. There is some valid concern that when shared spaces are imposed in their totality, when there is absolutely no infrastructure in place, the situation can become incredibly complicated. We all have anecdotal evidence of where it is or is not working, but we absolutely need to collect the data so that we can ensure that the guidance is the best that it can be.

As I mentioned, we will work with Transport Scotland to take on board all the feedback. We are working with our stakeholder groups to make sure that we have a much more informed decision on shared spaces, particularly with regard to controlled crossings and kerbs, and dealing with people with a variety of disabilities. It is only right that towns should be designed in a way that works for all, and the Government are determined to work with local authorities to ensure that this happens.

I have written a letter jointly with my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing to clarify the approach that should be taken to shared-space schemes. The letter makes it clear that the pause applies to schemes with relatively large amounts of pedestrian and vehicular movement such as high streets and town centres, but does not apply to streets within new residential areas or the redesign of existing residential streets with very low levels of traffic. Whether to improve individual schemes is a matter for local authorities, which need to ensure that they are compliant with their duties under the Equality Act 2010, but we hope that common sense will prevail before the updated guidance is issued.

The strategy includes a commitment that the Department will provide £2 million of funding to enable more Changing Places toilet facilities to be installed at our motorway service areas. Having access to these facilities can be genuinely life-changing for some families and allow them to make journeys that would otherwise have been impossible. We will shortly announce further details on how we intend to allocate this funding, and we will be working in partnership with Muscular Dystrophy UK. This should allow the majority of motorway service stations across the country to have Changing Places toilets by the early 2020s, compared with fewer than a fifth today.

The Department announced shortly after the publication of the strategy that it would extend the eligibility criteria for the blue badge scheme. The new criteria will extend eligibility to people who cannot undertake a journey without a risk of serious harm to their health or safety, or that of any other person such as young children with autism who cannot undertake a journey without it causing them very considerable psychological distress, or who have very considerable difficulty when walking. This is another step forward in ensuring that people with less visible disabilities get the support that they need to live independently. It was widely welcomed, including by the National Autistic Society, which said that it was “thrilled that the Department had listened to the concerns of autistic people and their families” and that the announcement would “make a massive difference to the lives of many of the 600,000 autistic people in England, and their families.”

The fifth and final theme in the strategy is the importance of making sure that our future transport systems work for everyone. Transport is changing, and the technologies and services we are using are also changing rapidly. Many of these changes will offer wonderful opportunities for disabled and older people. Autonomous vehicles, for example, could mean that those who would not otherwise be able to drive, including perhaps those with visual impairment, could do so for the first time.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In Birmingham, people are very excited about the 2022 Commonwealth games, and the Government recently announced £170 million to improve transport there. Does the Minister anticipate that that will ensure that the games are completely accessible to people of all abilities?

Ms Ghani: That is a very valid point. I assume that when my hon. Friend mentions the games being accessible to people of all abilities, he does not mean the contenders but the people who are going along to visit the great city.
of Birmingham. That should be the ambition—absolutely. Our desire is to make sure that our services are fully accessible, and any new funding recognises that as well. New technologies should be designed, from the outset, in such a way that disabled and older people can use them.

The strategy includes a commitment that the Government will publish a monitoring and evaluation framework explaining how we will measure the impact that it is having. That is really important. It is essential that we track the progress that is being made towards our goal of creating a transport system that offers equal access for disabled people. The Department will publish the detailed monitoring and evaluation framework in early 2019.

The strategy also includes a commitment that the Department will report regularly to Parliament on the delivery of commitments set out in it. This will allow hon. Members to hold us properly to account. Finally, the Department will publish the monitoring and evaluation framework in such a way that disabled and older people can use it.

Our desire is to make sure that our services are fully accessible, allowing disabled and older people to have more of an opportunity to shape the Department’s policies in the future. The announcements we have made in the strategy show that we have been listening to disabled people, and I am determined to ensure that we continue to do so as we deliver it.

The inclusive transport strategy marks a significant step forward in ensuring that our transport systems are genuinely accessible to all our users. This is a key part of making a society that works for us all. The strategy is ambitious, as it should be, and comprehensive, as it should be, and it sets out a clear direction of travel. The House will have an important role to play in holding the Government to account on the delivery of the strategy. I commend the inclusive transport strategy to the House and look forward to working with hon. Members as the Government deliver it.

2.17 pm

Rachel Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This debate is about the 13.9 million people in the UK who want to benefit from barrier-free travel, whether for work or leisure, whether to advance their opportunities or lifestyle, and to do so with choice and dignity, and without additional cost. No one chooses to be born with or to develop an impairment, and yet we know that disabled people are seriously economically and socially disadvantaged, frequently facing barriers throughout their lives, and facing discrimination even now in 2018—23 years after the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Inclusivity across our transport system can, should and must break this cycle and enable disabled passengers to access the things that the rest of us can enjoy. Labour fully comprehends this, because it is written in our DNA that when you create barriers, whether economically, socially or physically, you not only discriminate but limit the opportunities of others. We know how transport provides social connectivity to people who are isolated, can facilitate access to work or leisure, and can enhance independence and opportunity. To get this wrong means that the state has disabled people by allowing barriers to continue.
including a £32 million roll-over, to £87.1 million in 2012-13 prices, with the remainder of the original fund value now planned to be spent between 2020 and 2024. Labour is committed to restoring the £50 million that the Government have slashed from that budget.

Network Rail is inviting nominations for eligible stations, following the Government’s commitment of up to £300 million for Access for All in control period 6, but it is also looking for cash-strapped local authorities to contribute to bids and work in partnership—money that they do not have. Commitment is demonstrated by money. That is where the Government have been left wanting.

The Government’s inclusive transport strategy sets out five strands of work: raising awareness of passengers’ rights, staff training, improving information, improving infrastructure and using technology. Those are all welcome and all plausible, and long overdue. Addressing rights and responsibilities is good. Every penny wisely spent on infrastructure forms a crucial part of removing barriers for people who want equality, but sadly the strategy is not complete, and I therefore have to say that disappointment was felt on the Labour Benches. I know from talking to the amazing charities working on access issues across the transport sector that they share that disappointment.

I turn now to those who work across the network—something omitted from the Government’s strategy. Staff training, which we know can make a real difference, is rightly in the strategy, but who is working in the sector? If the transport sector does not make a radical change to who it employs, transport will fail to understand what is wrong. Of the 13.9 million disabled people, just 3.4 million, or 24%, work—what a wasted opportunity.

Every time I ask this question, I think of a constituent of mine who is autistic. He absolutely loves trains and wants to work on the railway. He has done courses and training under Government schemes, but at 30 he has only had three months of work sticking labels on jam pots. We are impoverished because his ambition has been denied. I set a challenge to the transport sector and the Minister today. Having tried to draw out statistics to no avail on how many disabled people work across the sector, which speaks volumes, my challenge is this: what are you doing to radically change the diversity of the workforce? No excuses and no prejudices—what are you doing?

If the workforce is inclusive, the industry and Government will not only grasp what they have to do to change, but economically, people who have been disabled will be able to get out of their homes and travel, and economically, the sector will benefit. If we have to enable staff, we have to enable everyone. Labour is committed to taking us on that journey, and we believe that the unions will be the facilitators of change. This is in Labour’s DNA. It is in our name. We are about embracing this inclusive world of work.

At this point, I want to recognise the incredible work that the Transport Salaried Staffs Association has done on neurodiversity and the transport sector. It stands out in the industry and has shown real leadership in recognising opportunity. I also have to extol the commitment and endurance of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers for its persistence in making the case that a second safety-critical person—a guard—must be on a train. It is right. If transport is to be inclusive, physical and structural changes have to occur, but we also need people to be there, providing the vital public service that enables, not disables, people.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is dealing with issues around the presence of staff. Does she agree that the presence of a member of staff on trains and at the station is not just important for disabled people—it may be vital for them—but is good for everyone, because it means that everyone who encounters a difficulty has someone they can go to for help and advice?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know how vital our public servants working across the rail industry and the transport network are, at vital interchanges and stations, providing not only signage and support for individuals but the holistic customer service that the public rightly expect.

Cracked pavements are a major transportation barrier for people who trip over the cracks. People have lost their lives as a result of this. If we are going to talk about active travel, which we must, we have to ensure that councils such as my own—which has shamefully not addressed this—are equipped to address this issue. Parking on pavements is a cause of this and must be addressed. I was delighted when the Minister said that she was committed to addressing this, to help visually and physically disabled people avoid serious risk.

We need to build a cycle industry for everyone. EMPOWERed Cycles, which I went out with a few weeks ago on a ride, is inspirational in the way that it adapts bikes to enable anyone who wants to cycle to do so. Labour wants every child to have the chance to ride and to access cycling—and, for that matter, we will extend that enjoyment to all, taking away the multiple barriers faced by disabled people who want to cycle. Making cycling accessible for them will make it accessible for all.

The Bus Services Act 2017 rightly demanded that audio-visual equipment be installed across the network—thanks to Labour’s amendment. However, two years on, we are still waiting for the Government to lay the regulations. When will those regulations be laid? Will Brexit get in the way yet again, or will we see them laid? The bus companies say that they are not able to install the equipment because they do not know the scope of the requirements on them. I urge the Government to move on that issue.

To access a bus, however, people need a bus. The cuts to bus routes, with 199 routes cut or reduced last year alone, have cut the opportunities for disabled people at a time when 60% of disabled people live in homes without a car. That is why Labour is committed to reconnect people and communities in rural and urban areas through our bus plan. As for the fear this Government have sowed throughout the community transport sector—I thank all those involved in the sector for their service—they have not even had the decency to respond to the consultation from May, which is six months ago, leaving community transport in paralysis. Labour would take away that fear and support this vital lifeline to so many.

In the light of the independent report on taxi and private hire that was published in September, “Taxi and private hire vehicle licensing: recommendations for a safer and more robust system”, Labour welcomes the
recommendations and has committed to reform the legislation guaranteeing national standards on safety and accessibility.

As for rail, we could dedicate a whole debate to station access. Stations absent of rumble strips on their platform edges and those with poor signage are failing the test. My trip to Biggleswade station highlighted how making such adjustments would mean that not only disabled people, but elderly people and mums and dads with pushchairs could use the train. Just 20% of stations are currently step-free. May I congratulate Liverpool’s metro Mayor, Steve Rotheram, and Councillor Liam Robinson, with their publicly owned trains on their publicly run network, on procuring an entire fleet of new trains that are step-free and accessible? It just goes to show what a publicly run service can achieve and why Labour will prioritise this issue—oh, and they have ensured that there will be guards on the trains.

I have to raise Govia Thameslink Railway’s disgraceful pronouncement earlier this year about dwell times at stations. That was another of its failings, and another reason that the Secretary of State should bring that route back under public ownership. It instructed staff: “DO NOT attempt to place PRM”—a person of reduced mobility—“on train if there is a possibility of delaying the service”, and that someone having a seizure should be moved “from the train as quickly as possible”. This is completely unacceptable. It boasted that such “processes will help us deliver a 21st century railway”.

No they will not, and to discriminate so overtly shows just how unfit such franchise holders are.

Labour further understands that we need a real shift in engineering. I say to disabled people, “Become engineers”, and I say to the Government, “Make this happen”. When our engineers, designers and transport leaders have lived experience, then we can engineer in access for those with even less visible disabilities, which are easy to ignore—I am sure that we all do that—on a daily basis. From railways to roads and from air to maritime travel, I have no doubt that the strategy will help to ensure that all forms of transport are made considerably more accessible to disabled people.

In Banbury, we have been talking a lot about our transport network as part of our bid to become an age-friendly town. A community-led initiative recently ran a survey of older people in the town, and transport came top of their list of priorities. We know that we have an ageing population across the nation, and that many people are living longer with more complex needs. Ensuring that they are able to access public transport is an important part of their independence. We have made really good progress: 98% of buses in England now comply with the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000, which is up from 28% in 2004. Audible and visual announcements are now commonplace, and many people are living longer with more complex needs. Ensuring that they are able to access public transport is an important part of their independence. We have made really good progress: 98% of buses in England now comply with the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000, which is up from 28% in 2004. Audible and visual announcements are now commonplace, and the new £2 million fund available to provide further support to the roll-out of these announcements across the UK’s bus network is welcome.

Many of my constituents have also benefited from community transport initiatives. Two years ago, residents in Wendlebury were pleased to receive funding from the Department for Transport’s community minibus transport fund. The minibus is available for hire by all villagers and it provides a vital lifeline to those who find it difficult to get around. The volunteer community connect transport scheme is run by my constituent, Keith Davies, through the Banbury citizens advice bureau. He and his fellow drivers work with the Royal Voluntary Service to help the elderly disabled to get to a GP or hospital appointment, pop to the supermarket and meet friends or visit family in town. Its work is really valued by our community, and it is right that it should be celebrated.

Local councilors have also been working extremely hard to reinstate community bus schemes that had gone out of service. In Banbury, I particularly want to celebrate
Councillor Kieron Mallon, who has helped to reinstate the B1 Easington route via Kidlington Assisted Transport. Three other bus routes have been piloted—the B7a and 7b in Grimsbury and Poets Corner and the B8 in Hardwick—and I am hopeful that they will become regular routes. We know that outside the inclusive transport strategy the Department is currently looking at the use of section 19 and 22 permits by some community transport operators. It is important that any action taken is proportionate and does not put any of these schemes at risk. We must continue to be proud of the support and help that the Government have given to community transport services.

I am sure that, like me, many colleagues here this afternoon will have received lots of emails from constituents about pavement parking. Guide Dogs has run an effective campaign. We know that cars parked on pavements and other street obstructions can be problematic for people in wheelchairs, the partially sighted, guide dog owners and indeed people with buggies, whom the Minister mentioned earlier. It is welcome news that the strategy recognises these issues and that the Department will carry out a wider review of pavement parking laws.

Extending the blue badge scheme will also make a genuine difference to those with hidden disabilities. The scheme has worked well, but I have long campaigned for temporary blue badges for those who have had an operation or broken a leg, for example. I have talked to the Minister about that before, and no doubt I will again. This great scheme could be more flexible, but in general it is to be celebrated.

I also welcome the strategy’s commitment to fund Changing Places lavatories at motorway service stations in England. In Banbury, we know how important these facilities are, even though we do not yet have one. Cherwell District Council has been exploring potential sites for a Changing Places facility over the last few months, and I really hope that we will be able to build one soon and that disabled people will not have to hang on much longer. Ensuring that adults with acute learning and physical disabilities have fully accessible toilets is really important. The £2 million fund to install facilities in motorway service stations will help to ensure that disabled people and their families can travel more comfortably and without worry.

There are many aspects of the strategy that I have not been able to touch on today but which are also extremely welcome to my constituents. I congratulate the Department on taking decisive action to open up our transport network so that it is accessible for all. Everyone deserves the right to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost and worry.

2.42 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in the debate, although the opportunity has come around rather sooner than I expected, so I am afraid that my speech is in the form of a large pile of Post-it notes. I apologise if it is a little disjointed. I welcome the Department’s work on an inclusive—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I made a mistake. I should have called the Scottish National party spokesperson. Does the hon. Gentleman wish to speak now?

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) indicated dissent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who is a valued member of the Transport Committee, for allowing me to continue.

I very much welcome the Department’s work on an inclusive transport strategy and the opportunity to debate these issues. We know that disabled people are often reliant on public transport, and much of my speech will focus on that. As the Minister said, disabled people face difficulties due to the accessibility of transport, its cost and attitudes, and as I have said already, many measures that can make public transport more accessible for people with a disability also make it more accessible for everyone. Audio-visual announcements on buses, which are standard in London and, I am pleased to say, available on almost all buses in my city of Nottingham, not only are essential for someone who is blind or visually impaired, but help everybody using the bus, particularly if they are visitors from out of town or going on an unfamiliar route. If people can hear what the next stop is, it helps everyone. We look forward to having visual announcements on all trains in the future. As people get older, they often experience greater difficulties with mobility and hearing, and with an aging population, addressing such issues becomes ever more pressing.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) talked about pavement parking. Guide Dogs has done important work to raise the profile of that issue and the problem it poses to many people with a disability, so I hope that the Minister will tell us when we can expect to see some change. Pavement parking was the subject of a private Member’s Bill some time ago, when the Government promised to act, so I would be grateful if she could give us a timescale. I also welcome the work around shared spaces, which is another issue that Guide Dogs and other organisations regularly raise on behalf of people with visual impairments.

Eddie Hughes: Does the hon. Lady also welcome the Government’s pledge to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027, and does she think that the inclusive transport strategy will help to achieve that?

Lilian Greenwood: Of course I welcome the commitment to getting more disabled people into work, but my concern is whether the Government are doing enough on a range of issues so that people have the support that they need to get back into work. Perhaps that is an issue for another day, but the availability of accessible and affordable transport certainly plays a key role in ensuring that disabled people can access the workplace.

Funding for these measures is really important, but sadly there is a problem in my city at the moment. In September, Nottingham City Council changed the rules for the concessionary pass for people with a disability. Until early September, disabled people could use their mobility pass before 9.30 am, which was a huge assistance not only to disabled people in work, but to many who would be travelling to attend hospital and other medical appointments. As a result of the funding reductions that the council has suffered, it has had to go back to the national system, which says that passes can be used only after 9.30 am. That enormously regrettable decision is having a significant impact on disabled people in my constituency, although I understand why the council made it. This is about the availability of resources as well as policy.
Another local issue—I wonder whether the Minister is aware of this at a national level, and whether it is a problem in other places—relates to payments for on-street parking through parking meters. Increasingly, meters that allow people to pay by cash are being replaced by services such as RingGo, which involve people paying for their parking by telephone or using their smartphone. I am concerned about the impact of that on older and disabled people, particularly those who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. Has the Minister considered that issue and asked local authorities that are implementing such changes whether they have properly considered the impact on disabled people?

I will come on to speak about a number of individual modes of transport, but people going on journeys do not think, “I’m going to take a bus journey and a rail trip, and then I’m going to walk.” People think about getting from their starting point—perhaps their home—to where they wish to go. We must ensure that there is joined-up thinking, because a disabled person needs to be confident that every leg of their journey will be reliable and accessible. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that there is the joined-up and integrated approach that a disabled person will need if they are to have the confidence to travel? Unfortunately, we know that many disabled people are stopped from travelling because they do not have that confidence.

A report published in April 2017 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that transport options for disabled people are “very limited” because of access and expense, and that disabled people report feeling “trapped” by high costs and limited options. The report also refers to “attitudinal or psychological barriers that prevent or discourage disabled people from using transport services. This could involve the behaviour and attitudes of some transport staff or concerns that people have about using transport, such as fear of crime, abuse or attack”.

Of course, those are not just issues for disabled people, as they often affect young travellers or women travelling late at night. There are many common issues that we can look to address.

Community transport has already been mentioned, and the Transport Committee’s first report of this Session considered the Government’s proposals on changing the regulations on section 19 and 22 permits. There is considerable concern among Members on both sides of the House about the potential impact of the Government’s changes. Indeed, it is not just a potential impact, because the Government’s actions in July 2017—before the Minister took responsibility for community transport—has been heartened by our discussions so far, but there is a number of issues to raise. One concern that has been highlighted by the Campaign For Better Transport since 2010 is the loss of supported bus services, which in part relates to the reduction in funding for local authority services. Thousands of services have been cut or scrapped altogether as result of those changes, and the impact that on people who depend on buses—they might be people on low incomes, older people, or of course disabled people—is a great concern. Ahead of the Budget, I hope that the Minister has had conversations with the Chancellor and put in a plea for appropriate funding for transport, and particularly for buses, which are so important to communities up and down the country. Those cuts have had a particular impact on rural communities and more isolated locations.

The curtailing of services can have a particular impact on disabled people. Last week, the Transport Committee held an outreach event in Leicester where we talked to bus users. One woman, who had been a driver in the past but due to having had a stroke was now a bus user, described how on one of her local services the number of stops had been reduced. Where the bus had previously stopped at the hospital, it now stopped at the bottom of the hill before it reached the hospital, leaving her with a difficult journey uphill to access a very important local facility. That is just one example of how services are sometimes curtailed in a way that has a disproportionate impact on disabled people.

Reference has been made to the importance of wheelchair spaces on buses. Everyone is of course aware of the potential clash between buggies and wheelchair users for that space. I pay tribute to Doug Paulley, who took this issue on and confirmed that disabled people should have access to them. I welcome the Government’s commitment to act, but I would like more clarity on when it will happen. We raised this issue during the passage of the Bus Services Act 2017 about 18 months ago, so it would be helpful to understand when further action will be taken. We do not want to see a clash between the needs of wheelchair users and those with large amounts of luggage or prams and buggies. We want to ensure that buses are accessible for everyone. There are some really good examples of bus design. Nottingham City Transport, in my constituency, has large banks of tip-up seats that allow space for two wheelchairs or a large number of parents with children in buggies, so it can be done. We need to ask some bus operators why they are not acting more quickly.

The same is also true for audiovisual announcements, which I have already mentioned. Another shocking example from our visit to Leicester last week was told to me by a young woman. Her friend, who is visually impaired, had got on a route that normally has audio announcements, even though it is not standard in that city. She noticed that there were no audio announcements, so she spoke to the driver who said, “Oh yes, we’ve turned them off because I find them annoying.” That is really shocking, so what action will be taken to ensure that that cannot happen?
Finally on buses, the Minister knows that I wrote to her about the importance of transport to hospital. Many of those who use an older person’s concessory bus pass use it to travel to hospital and medical appointments. I was really glad that, after I wrote to the Minister—alongside Age UK, which has done excellent work on this in its report, “Painful Journeys”—it appeared in the inclusive transport strategy. I just want clarification on some of the action that was promised. Has transport to hospital been raised at the disabled people and society cross-ministerial working group mentioned in the strategy? Is cross-departmental work currently under way? If so, what specifically is happening? What are the Minister’s plans for ensuring that the commitments in the strategy on transport to hospital actually happen? Will they definitely be built into the evaluation framework? I am sure that she will address those issues when she sums up later.

Trains often dominate our discussions. I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am hoping we have plenty of time for this debate.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that important issue about the experience that disabled people, including those with sensory impairments, face when they are out and about on our roads. In addition, some crossings do not allow enough time for people to get across the road. I am sure that the Minister has heard and will consider what my hon. Friend has said and that she will make sure that it is reflected in her final strategy.

I want to raise a couple more issues, one of which is about aviation. Many of us will have seen reports in the media of the experience of BBC journalist Frank Gardner on planes. At the moment, it is not possible to take a wheelchair on to a plane. Has the Minister looked into that, and when will it be addressed? Not entirely dissimilar is the question of taking mobility scooters on public transport. In Nottingham, many users of mobility scooters welcome the tram, because they can take their mobility scooter on to it. They do not need any assistance, because there is level-floor access; it is great. In some cities, albeit a small number, it is not possible to take mobility scooters on to the tram network. Three rail companies—Grand Central, Gatwick Express and Northern—have a total ban on mobility scooters. What discussions has the Minister had with them about improving the situation for those who rely on mobility scooters?

I want to mention a problem that sometimes arises for passengers on the railway who use “turn up and go”. I understand there can be a lack of communication between the originating station and the destination station. Will the Minister tell me what she is doing to ensure that train operators are addressing that issue, to ensure that there is good communication between stations?

My final plea is for the Minister to do something about fares. As she will know, fares on public transport have been rising faster than wages since 2010. That clearly has a disproportionate impact on disabled people who rely on public transport and many of whom have lower incomes, particularly those who have suffered changes in their disability benefits. Will the Minister ensure that funds are made available to hold down the cost of public transport so that more people can have access to it, either because they need to or because they want to? We know that it has many benefits in helping us to tackle congestion and poor air quality.
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, and also to follow the all-encompassing speech of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

It goes without saying that, although transport is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, there is certainly scope for us to discuss areas of best practice. I note, for example, that the inclusive transport strategy recognises that the UK Government are monitoring policy developments on the part of the Scottish Government, and I believe that it is sensible to proceed on that basis.

I am sure Members on both sides of the House agree that when we discuss this issue, the views of disabled transport users must be first and foremost in our minds. Whenever possible, it must be the experiences of disabled people that shape the policy. Our role is to try to understand the many practical difficulties that disabled people experience in accessing transport, such as the lack of wheelchair-friendly taxis, poor dropped kerbs leading to bus stops, and long-outdated train stations that do not cater for those who need extra assistance.

Obviously we all recognise that disabled people should not have to feel socially isolated or be treated like second-class citizens, and it behoves policy makers, north and south of the border, to ensure that our various forms of transport are genuinely accessible. Indeed, progress has been made as we move towards the point at which all buses, coaches and trains must be accessible to disabled people. In Scotland the percentage of buses that are accessible or have low floors increased from 33% in 2004-05 to 96% in 2015-16, and figures published in 2017 show that 47% of taxis in Scotland were wheelchair-accessible.

That progress, however, has been too slow for too long. The transport section of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 included a commitment that all licensed taxis would be wheelchair-accessible by 2012. The taxi trade had 17 years in which to deliver that goal with the encouragement of Governments, but it did not happen. As time has passed, successive UK Governments have allowed timescales to slip and transport providers to relax rules contained in the Disability Discrimination Act.

I have been greatly educated on this subject by one of my own constituents, Councillor Jim MacLeod from Port Glasgow. Jim has been a tireless champion of disability rights. Over many decades he has learned, through personal experience and from helping others, just how incremental progress has been. In his expert view, the most pressing issues facing disabled people are cars blocking access to pavements and dropped kerbs; a lack of wheelchair-accessible taxis; buses having only one wheelchair space, which is often taken up by prams; no announcements on buses to let blind people know where the stops are; a lack of accessible train stations or railway staff to assist disabled people getting on and off trains; and a range of continuing issues relating to disabled people boarding planes. Other Members have raised all those issues today, so it is clear that they exist throughout the United Kingdom.

When reading background media coverage relating to this subject, I was struck by one particular story from Edinburgh. It concerned a wheelchair user who said that she had felt “embarrassed and humiliated” when a bus driver refused to fold away an empty buggy, which would have allowed her to enter the bus. Another passenger then shouted at the woman, blaming her for the bus being held up. The passenger continued to snigger and demean the woman, which made her feel that “some people are valued more than others.”

In 2018 it is truly shocking that anyone, particularly a wheelchair user, is made to feel like that for something as simple as entering a bus. This is not an isolated incident: it is alarming to note that disability hate crime in England, Wales and Scotland has risen dramatically in the last year. Further, research by disability charity Scope found that one in four disabled people have been prevented from using public transport by other people’s attitudes. In the context of the inclusive transport strategy I therefore welcome the UK Government’s commitment to launching a public awareness campaign in England and Wales to promote ways in which members of the public can positively interact with disabled people to encourage a supportive travelling experience.

In Scotland, too, we have learned the lessons of the “letters from Scotland” campaign in an effort to highlight hate crime and to send a message of solidarity and support to those on the receiving end of such abuse. Such campaigns are vitally important because there is no point in having the latest accessible buses or newest technology only for disabled people to be put off travelling because of intolerance from passengers or transport staff. If we are serious about tackling the disability employment gap, we must be moving towards the point where disabled people accessing transport is just an everyday, unremarkable, mundane occurrence. Sadly we are not at that point yet.

Undoubtedly, new technologies will play a part in making transport more accessible, and might even revolutionise how disabled people are able to move around the community. I recently met with BMW who showed me some of their work in the field of automated cars. Their vision is impressive, but emergent technologies like fully automated vehicles are still a long-term aspiration.

In that regard, it is important that we are realistic about how disabled people use technology. Polling by Scope found that disabled people are far more likely than able-bodied people to use “mainstream” technology than “specialised” assistive technologies. In a sample of 2,000 disabled people, 78% said that mobile technology was helpful or very helpful in helping them live more independently. Some 65% on the other hand indicated that they either did not use assistive technology or did not find it helpful. I hope digital companies therefore realise the excellent market potential in developing technologies that can assist disabled people in travelling. In this instance, both the developer and the consumer have much to gain from the implementation of new technologies.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On 6 June I had the opportunity through an Adjournment debate to raise the issues brought to me by my constituents Margaret Ambaras and Laurel Holleran, who are blind and partially sighted. They and their colleagues took me on a blindfolded walk which allowed me to experience the difficulties they have to face. In that debate I highlighted to the Minister, who is also responding to this debate, a number
of issues that they raised with me, some of which have again been referred to today. Those issues are pavement parking and shared spaces and issues to do with taxis, accessible information on buses and safety in travelling.

In that debate, I was able to explain the problems they were having and asked the Minister some specific questions about pavement parking and guidance on shared spaces. I am very disappointed therefore that pavement parking gets barely a mention in the inclusive shared spaces. I am very disappointed therefore that that issue has not been tackled, because it is very important for them. It really affects their ability to get around and to make the whole journey by walking from, for example, where they live to the railway station, the bus stop or other locations. It is really sad that we have missed this opportunity to do something very immediate to resolve that problem. As the Minister will recall, local authorities are keen to have guidance on this issue so that they can tackle it.

The issue of shared spaces is considered in the inclusive transport strategy, and it is good that the Government have put a pause on them, but as others have said, there is no clear guidance for local authorities on retrofitting shared spaces to ensure that they are safer for people with disabilities of all kinds, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister exactly what is going to happen now. What are we going to do? Are we going to ban shared spaces, as many people with these problems would like to see, or will there be guidance on exactly how to make the existing ones safer? Looking to the future, how are we going to ensure that people with disabilities are able to cope with them? I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on that.

In the debate, I also asked the Minister whether the Department would issue statutory guidance to licensing authorities on disability awareness training. It is clear from my constituents’ experiences that such guidance has not always been available. I note that there is a reference in the strategy to providing such guidance, and that a working party is looking at the issue, but as I understand it, the Government have not responded to the working group’s report on this aspect. That is disappointing as well, and I wonder whether the Minister could update us on when we are likely to get a response on that issue.

I also asked the Minister about accessible information on buses. This is already provided in some places, but as others have said, it is sometimes switched off and it sometimes just does not work. That is something that really needs to be tackled, but I note from the report that it has been deferred to the end of the year for further guidance to be issued. Will she also comment on that?

The Minister was kind enough to write to me after the debate about the issue of guards on trains. This has already been referred to many times this afternoon, because many people with disabilities are really concerned that there will no longer be guards on trains. They have relied on those guards to help them in the past, and their presence is a key part of ensuring that people with disabilities feel safe on trains. The Government have to reconsider their position on this, because it is so important to so many people. Again, this is a missed chance.

I know that the Minister understands the importance of some of these issues because, as she said in my Adjournment debate, she herself has had experience of them within her family. However, I am really sorry to see that pavement parking has been sidelined. Other issues that have been mentioned today include the importance of bus services to people with disabilities. My constituents Margaret and Laurel have told me about the importance of bus services to them, so it is really disappointing to see the number of bus services being reduced nationally. We are seeing bus services disappearing in my own area, where funds are stretched, and I know that that is happening across the country.

Another issue that we talked about in that debate was accessibility on trains. As other Members have said, this is not just about step-free access in stations; it is also about being able to get on a train. In my case, when I get the train in Newcastle, I have a struggle to get on it because there is a huge gap. What steps are being taken to ensure that there is funding to make our stations and our trains properly accessible?

At this point, I should refer to my constituent Catherine Nichols, a young woman with a number of disabilities, some of which are visual and some of which relate to her mobility. Catherine never ceases to remind me of how important it is that people like her and those with other disabilities are able to get on a train and that trains are suitable for them to use safely. We need to pick up on such issues, but it seems that money will be a real restriction on any improvements, but I want accessibility to be improved, so money is necessary, and other Members have asked the Minister to raise that with the Chancellor.

We cannot ignore the issue of pavement parking, as raised by Guide Dogs and my constituents, any further. The matter has been put off and put off, but it needs resolving because it is hampering people’s ability to get where they need to be and to use accessible transport. The issue needs to come to the top of the pile and be addressed as a matter of urgency.

3.20 pm

Rachael Maskell: As expected, we have had an insightful and thoughtful debate about how we must absolutely remove the barriers that have been created across the transport system, which have disabled 14 million people across the UK who experience some form of impairment. I thank all hon. Members for highlighting their concerns, their cares and their local examples. Each case tells a story of how communities have been denied access to transport and, therefore, to the opportunities enjoyed by so many of us.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) extolled the transport system in Oxfordshire, but it is alarming to learn of the level of cuts made by the Tory-run Oxfordshire County Council. The impact on
the buses has been of such a scale as to garner national media attention, showing that the Government’s austerity plan is still very much alive.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) gave us a tour de force as she took us around the different modes of transport in her constituency, eloquently setting out what needs to be done and highlighting Nottingham City Council’s dedication to increasing disabled people’s access to transport. Like her, I regret the fact that the cuts that her council has faced mean that it is not able to offer disabled people the ability to use their passes at peak times. I hope that the Chancellor will give her some hope on Monday. The intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith)—I was sorry to hear about the loss of his constituent’s dog—highlighted how important it is that road users and planners ensure that vehicle parking does not create more barriers.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) highlighted the progress made by the Scottish Government, who are moving far faster on initiatives than the UK Government. He mentioned how his constituent Jim MacLeod had alerted him to the barriers that disabled people face. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) again spoke about her experience as her constituents Laurel and Margaret took her on a tour of her constituency to highlight the barriers that visually impaired people face. She also spoke of the essential role of guards on trains. Following all those contributions, there is clearly much to be done.

Communication was a theme in today’s debate. Whether in person, by providing information or through the latest technology, it is important that we are able to communicate with disabled people to enhance their experience of the transport system. We have heard about the different modes of transport that are available, but if we bring modes of transport together at an interchange, we must ensure that those choices are available to everyone, including disabled people. It is vital that we get the maps and apps right and that we extend the opportunity to access transport to everyone. The challenge before us today is to take advantage of all those opportunities and technologies through the work of our dedicated transport workers.

Labour sees transport interchanges as a real opportunity. We have heard how people can be disadvantaged by stations not being accessible, and therefore we need to bring about redress. The historical franchises should employ disabled people and, of course, under our national railway plan we would not have to wait years until franchises run out. We could make those changes and make a difference to disabled people.

We have heard about the impact of different environments, about people who struggle in crowded environments and perhaps require additional support. I was heartened when I met London North Eastern Railway a week ago, as it now employs an access and inclusion manager, Charlie Woodhead. I look forward to working with him, and it shows what can be done by a publicly owned railway service. I hope others will follow that example.

Making transport accessible means that more people can travel. Having more people travelling on public transport is better for our environment, and it is better for everyone economically, for the individual traveller and for the Treasury.

Of course everyone should have the opportunity to book in advance, and it is a positive advance if systems can retain information about a traveller’s support needs. However, everyone must also have the opportunity to turn up and go, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South said. That is clearly where transport is failing, and I trust that, significantly, the strategy will mean that everyone can have equality of access to our transport system.

As I said in my opening speech, 14 million people depend on the Government getting this right. My hon. Friends and I have set out how planes, trains, ferries, buses, cycling, walking and other modes of transport can be accessible. My hon. Friends are determined to see barriers removed, lives transformed and opportunities unleashed for all those who experience barriers today, whether economically, socially or physically. A Labour Government will ensure that they have the opportunities they deserve.

3.27 pm

Ms Ghani: With the leave of the House, I wish to thank the House for the opportunity to discuss this important inclusive transport strategy. The debate has been good natured, and both sides of the House clearly agree that the strategy is a positive and ambitious programme, but of course there is always more to do to help disabled people and older passengers to access our transport system. I am pleased to note that this might be the first time an Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson has welcomed the Government’s work, and I look forward to working with Members on both sides of the House to deliver the inclusive transport strategy. We have also heard some powerful stories about how passengers have been undermined, have lost their confidence or have been made to feel incredibly small when all they were trying to do was undertake a journey. That is just not acceptable, and we hope the inclusive transport strategy will address that in some part, especially in addressing the level of training that has to be undertaken by so many people involved in our transport network.

Transport is an essential part of our society, especially through its ability to help us to access work and school, and to stay in contact with friends and family. Through those connections, transport reduces feelings of social isolation, anxiety and loneliness. Transport should be easily accessible, and it is essential to helping to build a stronger and fairer society and a stronger economy. I hope Members will agree that the inclusive transport strategy is bold and shows not only my commitment but the commitment of the Department for Transport to building a more inclusive transport system—a transport system that provides good customer service, that gives disabled people the confidence to use it and that provides information in a range of formats to support journey planning and unexpected changes along the route.

I now wish to discuss some of the valid contributions made by Members from across the House. First, let me deal with the points raised by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), because she asked so many questions. It would be near impossible for me to answer all of them, so I hope she will allow me also to respond in writing. She made a request for further clarity on what the Government will be doing.
on wheelchair spaces. In my time at the Department, I have always been clear that a wheelchair access space is for wheelchairs, but I accept that further training is required for some people to empower them to ensure that they can deliver that advice and guidance when they undertake their day-to-day job.

An expert stakeholder group was established and has advised Ministers on a combination of amendments to legislation and guidance and in March we accepted those recommendations. We will also bring measures forward by the end of the year. Fundamentally, this involves much better training and understanding, in order to enable people to apply common sense.

The issue of community transport was raised, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). I agree that community transport is vital, especially in the most rural constituencies; we have fantastic volunteers doing phenomenal work, be it with younger or older people, across the spread of community transport provision up and down the country. A consultation has indeed taken place and we are aiming to publish our response as soon as we can—I hope it will be in the next couple of months. It is vital to remember that clear guidance has been given by the Department to ensure that local authorities are not stopping taking contracts, and I am having as many conversations as I can to ensure that. Community transport is incredibly valuable and we need to make sure that any guidance we give lands appropriately; sometimes we may not fully calculate the language we use, but our motivations are to ensure that local community transport groups can continue to provide a service for the communities they wish to serve.

The hon. Members for Nottingham South and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised an important point about joined-up travelling, because people can set off on a journey only to find that things do not work out. They want to be able to ensure that their next mode of transport is available. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we are going to set up a transport leaders scheme that enables all the modes of transport to communicate with each other. One of my ambitions is for passengers to be fully up to date. Any piece of equipment, app or whatever this becomes has to be linked up. Whatever journey someone is taking and whoever is taking care of them, they should be able to communicate with the next person on that journey and with the person who may or may not be receiving them at the end of that journey. That is the challenge I have set the sector and that is what I am going to be working towards the sector delivering.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South also asked how often we discuss various modes of transport at the inter-ministerial group on disability and society, especially in respect of looking at community transport, and at transport to and from hospital and medical appointments. I assure her that I raise all these issues, including with the planning department that sits on the group, which discusses where bus stops are allocated, whether they are on the wrong side of the road for people who are getting off, whether they are near hospitals and so on. I also talk to the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that it fully understands how these services should be procured, taking into account the needs of passengers at all times.

The hon. Lady also asked for statistics on Access for All. We have allocated £300 million and we hope that we can do as much work as we can, as swiftly as we can. Figures to the end of 2017 suggest that more than £85 million has already been spent on Access for All projects, and we have £300 million in place now. All those projects that were deferred previously will now be assessed for the new Access for All funding.

The hon. Lady also referred to pavement parking, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury—[Interruption.] Forgive me, it was the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). The issue has been tackled by the Department, and one of our Ministers is gathering evidence on the effectiveness of the current pavement parking laws. We are considering changes to the law and listening carefully to concerns raised by campaigners. There is a commitment to ensuring that we can put out the review by the end of the year. In all the decisions that we make, we have to make sure that we reflect everyone’s concerns and do not make fast decisions that might cause adverse reactions in local communities.

An important and valid point was made about parking meters that require people to use their phones, so I shall take that away and ensure that we pick up on it. We will see what we can do with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee and other disability groups that we work with, and ask whether people not having an app, or being unable to use an app or to do whatever they need to do, is causing an issue with parking. We must make sure that parking is accessible for everybody, so I am grateful that that point was made and will make sure that it is tackled.

Let me respond to some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Inverdale—

Ronnie Cowan: Inverclyde.

Ms Ghani: I am awful at reading and writing, aren’t I?

We have assigned £2 million to public awareness campaigns and we will ensure that we can tackle not only the sector that has to deliver the service, but the public. It is not right that we hear stories of people’s inappropriate behaviour, or of individuals—whether they are bus or train drivers—who are employed to deliver a service but just make really poor decisions. I hope that the inclusive transport strategy can deliver confidence among people who are disabled so that they can undertake journeys and are not deterred by one bad journey. We do not want to put anybody off, so I am really pleased that the debate was not negative at all and was about making sure that people can feel positive about leaving their home and undertaking journeys.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury started her speech by saying that lavatories and lifts are not celebrated about leaving their home and undertaking journeys. As I said, we will undertake a review of pavement parking. She spoke about the wonderful community transport work that is being done in Wednesbury and the bus routes in her constituency. As I said, we will undertake a review of pavement parking. She spoke about the importance of the blue badge scheme going beyond what we accept as disabilities in the traditional sense and acceptance of other disabilities, as well as about the importance of Changing Places facilities. Such facilities are something that we do not come across until we need them or become a carer for someone
who does, but they are vital. We hope to have facilities in place in most service stations in the country. My ambition is for them to be in place in all service stations, but unfortunately ministerial ambitions and budgets have to sit side by side. With that programme of work, it is important that the decisions are not made within the Department; we are working with Muscular Dystrophy UK to make sure that the right decisions are made.

I cannot let the debate end without talking about our passion for buses and for doing what we can to make sure that bus patronage goes up. There are variations up and down the country. There are fantastic places, from Liverpool to Brighton, where bus patronage is up. That is mostly down to the services provided, with up-to-date information and journey times that are sort of guaranteed. People are able to use technology on buses, and there are concessionary fares or cheaper fares for younger people. It is really about understanding the customer base. We have around £1 billion for local authorities to support concessionary fares, whether for disabled people or older pass holders. I am always campaigning for more funding for buses. It is vital that we have one place, one direction and one strategy, so I am keen to work with my Department to put together an investment strategy that focuses on bus services today and tomorrow.

Hon. Members' references to taxis and private hire vehicles ranged from the illegal behaviour of not allowing guide dogs into cabs to the question of how we raise standards. Reference was also made to the task and finish group, which did indeed produce its recommendations in the summer. I am in the process of putting together the Government’s response, but Members can rest assured that issues relating to what is already illegal are fully understood and that standards throughout the country will be good and not varied, as they are currently. There is not too long to wait for that.

Some comments were made about aviation. We all hear dreadful stories of wheelchairs being broken or not arriving on time, and of passengers not being dealt with. The Department has been working hard with not only the aviation sector, but the disability groups that we work with, take evidence from and consult. An aviation strategy consultation will be produced by the end of 2018.

Cracked pavements were also mentioned. I am surprised that my constituency was not mentioned, because this matter comes up quite a bit, even in Wealden. The Department has a substantial amount of funding for highways maintenance. I believe that an investment of £3.8 billion between 2016-17 and 2020-21 will address the matter, but the point is absolutely valid.

We heard that bus drivers were turning off audio-visual information. We are investing £2 million to make sure that that information is available, especially among smaller bus companies, because it is absolutely key for all people who use buses, not only those who are disabled. It makes no sense whatsoever to turn off that information. Once again, training is absolutely key in this area.

A number of comments were made about driver-operated-only and driver-controlled-only trains and levels of staffing. First, we must be aware that where those issues have been raised, such as on the Southern lines, there has been an increase in staff, not a reduction. We must also understand that driver-operated-only and driver-controlled-only trains have been operating for a substantial amount of time. It is not always about having more people available; it is also about having the right people with the right training. It does not help if more people are available but they do not do the right thing by supporting passengers who have concerns about disability and accessibility. As this matter is often raised, it is important that people know that the motivation behind the inclusive transport strategy is to ensure that disabled passengers have a good-quality service. That is the primary goal of the strategy. Opposition Front Benchers need to decide whether to prioritise passenger experience, or whatever a union wishes to push. We need to establish whether we look at training across the rail network, including for drivers, or support union practices that may or may not get in the way of providing a better service for passengers. I believe that we need to focus on passengers, instead of on what the unions might be arguing for at any one point.

The inclusive transport strategy has not only a very ambitious plan, which will obviously continue to be in place, but a substantial amount of money behind it. We have £300 million for Access for All, which is about not just steps, but anything that a train operating company, in conjunction with the local community and the local authority, believes needs to be amended at a station or on a platform to make it more accessible. There is also £2 million of new funding for the Changing Places scheme, as well as £2 million for audio-visual information for smaller bus operators, which is backed up with training so that drivers do not switch it off when it is meant to be working. A substantial amount is also available for awareness.

I have set out what is happening today but, if I may, I will take a moment to talk about the future. Throughout the Government’s industrial strategy and in all our major transport infrastructure projects, technology is absolutely key. We want to make sure that transport is at the forefront of absorbing any new technology that will enable us to provide the most efficient service possible. New developments such as autonomous vehicles and mobility as a service offer benefits to our economy and have a great potential to improve the options available to disabled people. It is important that we are always abreast of new products and services to ensure that we design the most inclusive transport system.

We also have in place the future of mobility call for evidence, which is focusing on technology’s potential to help people to access and use transport. It is essential, as has been noted, that the designs developed are within the reach of all people, regardless of their disability. There is no point our running ahead and using technology from which people already feel excluded.

I thank the House for this opportunity to consider the important issues highlighted by the inclusive transport strategy. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members have been persuaded of not only my commitment, but the commitment of the Department, to improving accessibility for everyone on our transport network. I hope that that will not only make people’s journeys easier but, fundamentally, increase their confidence to go about their lives in the same way as the rest of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the inclusive transport strategy.
M26 Closures

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

3.44 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to be here, speaking on behalf of the people I represent and on an transport issue of which many people will be very conscious, given the events of recent weeks, but let me start by saying how sorry I am that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will not be intervening this afternoon. We will all miss the adventure and surprise of finding out what connection the M26 in Kent could possibly have to Strangford. Sadly, that will be for another day.

The M26 is a key strategic road in the south-east of England that helps to connect our country to our European neighbours, providing a reliable link to our nearest port at Dover. It also facilitates the significant east-west traffic flow through the county of Kent. Communities such as Ashford, Maidstone, and those I represent in West Malling and Borough Green, have grown and prospered because the road network provides superb links with the rest of the south, along the M25-M26-M20 corridor. Therefore, any plan that might prevent such good access would cause economic and social damage to the area and require significant planning and mitigation. A scheme of enormous scale—such as turning the M26 into a lorry park—would require lots of consultation to allow people to plan for alternative routes.

The Government plan to use the M26 as a lorry park. Now, this is a surprise. It would fundamentally change the lives of residents and businesses across Kent, but neither the Department for Transport, nor Highways England, has asked to hear the thoughts of those affected. I am pleased that the Secretary of State and the Minister, who I am delighted to see in his place, met me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) last week, and I am happy that we have a further meeting with our local councils next week. I speak for all in saying that we understand that contingencies have to be made for a no-deal Brexit, but this is not a workable solution. Now, this is not just not workable for west Kent, but for the whole country, as this is ultimately a national concern.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I appreciate the time that the hon. Gentleman has taken to highlight the issues in Kent and across the country. Does he agree with me—an MP representing a constituency in another part of south-east England—that there may well be particular congestion pressures on the south-east, as the problems that he described on the M26 spread to the M25, M4 and other neighbouring motorways, affecting all our towns and cities across the south-east of England?

Tom Tugendhat: Indeed; I am getting to that exact point, and I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman should make it.

When plans are developed for any area, local residents and businesses are expected to have their say, but that has not happened here. No information was given on why the closures were happening, other than for “central reservation works”. This phrase could realistically mean anything, and does not indicate the scale of what is proposed. I checked with a few people, including local county councillor, Harry Rayner—a more assiduous representative of the community it would be hard to find—but I could not find anyone who knew about the central reservation works. Earlier this year, I had heard that the idea of using the M26 to store HGVs was being talked about as a vague possibility, which is why I wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 April to raise my concern about the wider effect that this level of disruption would have on the local strategic road network. I shall quote from the letter that the Minister has no doubt seen, but that others in the House may care to hear:

“I would be grateful if I could meet urgently with your team planning this to talk about the impact closing the M26 for a sustained period would have on the local road network and the villages which rely on it.”

This is hardly a surprising turn of phrase, but as no meeting was forthcoming, I wrote to Highways England about works on the strategic road network in Kent. The M26 was not mentioned in its reply.

As recently as three weeks ago, when I asked Highways England if there were any plans to use the M26 in the case of a no-deal Brexit, I was told that there were not, so I was satisfied that there were no plans to subject communities in the area to even more traffic nightmares. For months, I have told the people I represent that this would not happen, following assurances that I had received. I now feel that we have all been let down. Why was there no consultation? The Department for Transport and Highways England are publicly funded, and they should be held accountable for their decisions. To fail to consult the communities most affected by the scale of the proposal is unacceptable. The very least they can do is to apologise.

I am calling for a fundamental rethink of this idea, which would almost cut communities off and cause chaos across the whole area, particularly as there are alternatives outside Kent; I would like the Minister and his Department to explore these. I very much hope that he will have detail on this by the time of his meeting with me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks and our councils next week. We need to explore how we keep lorries at their source rather than allowing them to park in Kent—neither their start point nor, indeed, their end destination. There is technology available and emerging that would enable this to happen. The M26 is not a lorry park and does not have to be used in this way.

Since the closures were announced two weeks ago, a lot of people have linked the proposal to the vote to leave the European Union, but Kent has actually been looking for a solution since Operation Stack plagued the county in 2015, well before the referendum, let alone the result. The impact of closing the M26 is severe, regardless of the cause. Take policing, for example. Our excellent police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, has said that pretty much every traffic officer in the county would be needed to patrol a closed motorway. This would create a huge hole in Kent police’s resources, with neighbourhoods nervous about losing their officers to cover for their colleagues. It is no wonder that Matthew thinks this is an unworkable idea.

The views of local people and representatives like Matthew matter because their local knowledge can provide real insight and solutions. For example, has anyone thought what happens to HGVs travelling north
on the A21, or south from the Dartford crossing on the M25? There are no slip roads on to the M26, so how would they join the queue? Do they rat-run through villages like Shipbourne to get to the junction? Sat-navs— which, as we all know, have caused many issues for lorry drivers and for people living on small roads in past years—will no doubt take lorries through small lanes that are unsuitable. Do they travel the wrong way on the M25, or go along the A25 through six air quality management areas in 18 miles? These 18 miles along the M25 and M26 are the longest stretch of motorway in England without a junction. The A25 runs parallel the whole way—a single carriageway almost everywhere, even through villages such as Borough Green that suffer the most with air quality and congestion. Borough Green cannot cope with more traffic, particularly large HGVs. Its air quality will suffer even more. It is a perfect example of why the problem needs to be stopped at source, rather than parking HGVs in Kent that then cannot proceed on to Europe.

Could using the M26 as a lorry park be mitigated? Possibly, but I want to know what avenues the Department has explored. Can lorries be kept at source? Will my hon. Friend the Minister look at utilising lorry-holding facilities before the Dartford crossing so that Kent does not have to bear the whole of this load? If not, how can the Government provide appropriate mitigations for communities like Borough Green and Platt on the A25? That question is perhaps the hardest to answer. It requires significant investment. Take the air quality issue. How can the Minister and colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs provide funds and suitable equipment to properly measure the impact? How can they make sure that Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council can enforce the statutory limits so that they are kept within? What additional powers will be granted? These are all questions that we do not yet know the answers to.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) joins me in the comments that I now make. Currently, when there is a problem on the M26, the impact stretches further afield, much further south and east of the motorway. For example, the A227 is the only realistic route in or out of Wrotham and runs over the M26. Congestion there leaves the village almost cut off, with a single track road to the west the only option. The conurbation of Wrotham—a wonderful and very beautiful village—and its neighbours Borough Green, Platt, Ightham and others understandably feels that it has been getting rough treatment recently. Its infrastructure is declining, when connectivity matters more than ever.

I want to try to make the lives of people living and working in these beautiful villages better, not worse, but traffic congestion and poor air quality remain problematic, and rail services are often unreliable and slow. I do not need to rehash the issues surrounding the Southeastern timetable changes, but added to the delayed start to Thameslink services to the City of London and compounded by the threat of a lorry park, villages could be cut off.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that this seems to imply that the Department for Transport simply is not sufficiently well prepared for what might come about on 39 March next year? Is he aware that the Comptroller and Auditor General expressed concerns about the Department’s preparedness last week to the Brexit Committee, when he said that the Department “has convinced itself that it is less risky than it actually is”? Is it not time that the Department got on top of this issue, to avoid the very problems for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents that he has set out so eloquently?

**Tom Tugendhat** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does Lilian Greenwood?

**The Chair of the Transport Committee**, when he said that the Department’s preparedness last week to the Brexit Committee, when he said that the Department “has convinced itself that it is less risky than it actually is”? Is it not time that the Department got on top of this issue, to avoid the very problems for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents that he has set out so eloquently?

**Tom Tugendhat**: I thank the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Transport Committee, and I should also pay tribute to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). They have both taken up this question with great diligence. If she will forgive me, I am going to focus on the issue particularly relating to Kent, which is not only about Brexit. In fact, this issue is not specifically Brexit-related. It is, as we know, related to Stack, which happened before the referendum and would no doubt have arisen anyway should there have been any issues with crossing the channel. I will focus on the M26 rather than on wider issues, which she not only suggests but has done very capably through her Committee work.

It is worth considering the other implications. There is a planned 3,000-home new development in the area as part of the draft Tonbridge and Malling local plan, which is out for consultation at the moment and to which I urge those who wish to comment to respond as soon as possible. Should that be approved, it will put additional strain on local road and rail networks. Do an extra 3,000 families need hundreds of additional vehicles thundering down country lanes every day? I do not think so, and I would be surprised if others did.

Clarity, consistency and communication matter, especially for businesses. Take, for example, ALS Airport Travel in West Malling. Every day, its drivers make countless journeys from the Malling area to Gatwick. The combination of closing the M26 and the existing smart motorway work on the M20 will have a hugely detrimental impact on the business.

We have no faith in Highways England to manage two neighbouring works concurrently. It cannot even get the M20 scheme right at the moment. Lower speed limits, narrow lanes and full road closures are already forcing traffic on to local roads. Accidents are on the rise. We see the effect every day. Highways England’s woeful lack of communication across any scheme sees closure dates change frequently and residents unsure of what it will deliver for them. It has happened already with the scooping works on the M26 last week. The motorway opened two days before it was planned to, which is great, but Highways England failed to tell anyone that it had happened. The Department and Highways England really must start talking to the people who are most affected by these plans.

Closing the M26 to hold lorries will impact public transport, too. In a rural area, where many people travel long distances to school, even the slightest delay in the morning affects the network for the rest of the day. Has the Department spoken, for example, to local bus operators about that? How will it ensure that children get to school on time? More pressingly, should the education of students in west Kent be impacted day in, day out, because the area is at a standstill due to HGVs preferring not to stop in the county and blocking our major roads?
One possibility that I would like to see implemented if this proposal proceeds is to relax the rules of the traffic commissioner to allow bus operators and Kent County Council to modify and change bus routes quickly. Some people, including me, have argued that 70 days’ notice is too long already, but the Government have an obligation to ensure that public transport still works and to put into place changes that mean children can get to school on time and as stress-free as possible.

This is just as important for any other motorist, so can the HGV parking ban on Kent County Council roads, piloted in Ashford, be extended county-wide, and can the penalty be increased, with permission to clamp on the first offence as well? Without that, our roads will not have a chance of being free and available for local traffic to use. Sadly, clamping matters in this circumstance. Can roadworks on local roads be limited, too? I would like powers to be granted to Kent County Council to enable it to charge more than currently permitted under the lane rental scheme to limit works causing delays on the roads. This would require departmental approval and, I understand, a statutory instrument, but it is precisely the sort of change that needs to happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I could talk more about the further mitigations possible under part 4 of schedule 7 to the Traffic Management Act 2004, but I trust you and the Minister already understand my concern. There is an argument that, wherever disruption might occur, these ideas should be implemented. This summer, a sinkhole developed on the A26 in Maidstone, closing the road for months, and the whole of mid and west Kent suffered as a result. The highway network in our corner of Kent is not resilient, and this needs to be considered as well.

At yesterday’s Public Accounts Committee sitting, the permanent secretary of the Department admitted that the works on the M26 would cost £30 million to £35 million and include hard shoulder improvements as well as the central reservation works. Can the local community also benefit from these improvements? Why not pursue a simpler solution and stop HGVs entering Kent in the first place? Why should it be the responsibility of the garden of England to turn into the parking lot of France?

I want to touch on a social issue that I know concerns my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks. The M26 is largely rural and it is far from any services. If lorries are parked here, how will drivers be fed and provided with water and sanitation facilities, and where will they sleep at night? Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council have clear statutory responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, so why have they not been informed either? Both councils do a brilliant job across all services, and they are excellently run, with extremely capable leaders and officers. I am pleased that the Minister will meet us on Tuesday, and it is clear than any proposal on the M26 would require abnormally high levels of Government support for our local councils.

I want to help the Minister and his Department to find a solution to this problem. I welcome the wonderful benefits that the freight industry brings, but there must be a better solution than turning major roads in the county into a lorry park. I look forward to his response and to working with him and local councils in finding such solutions. Before I sit down, I must extend the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, who express their support, but sadly could not be in the Chamber this afternoon.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate on the effect of the M26 road closures on local residents and businesses. I, and of course colleagues and officials, appreciate that this is an issue of great concern to him, on behalf of his constituents. I have met him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). Knowing the very strong feelings that my right hon. Friend has expressed in public, it is a pity that he could not join us for this important debate and share directly with us the issues that my hon. Friend has raised.

I know that my hon. Friend has raised this with the Secretary of State, and he and I have of course separately discussed it. Let me be clear: the Secretary of State has apologised to my hon. Friend, and I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to him as well—and not just to him, but to his constituents and other affected parties—for the communication failures that have occurred in this case.

Before I respond to the specific points raised by my hon. Friend, it may assist if I set out some of the circumstances that led to the M26 road closures. The work on the M26 that my hon. Friend has mentioned is, as he knows, related to our wider efforts to improve arrangements for traffic management in Kent in the event of disruption at the short channel crossings. In that work, we have been very conscious of the need to do more to mitigate the impact of such disruption on his constituents and Kent residents more generally. The Government are seeking to avoid any repeat of the scenes in 2015 that he referred to and which all colleagues from that area will recall, when Operation Stack was deployed to address disruption—nothing to do with Brexit of course—at the border. This saw long-term traffic problems on the M20 and other Kent roads, especially local roads. It is precisely the point of the work being done now to avoid this kind of disruption.

Since 2015, there have already been increases in lorry-holding capacity at the port of Dover and at Eurotunnel. Highways England has also made improvements to the Dover traffic assessment protocol—known as the Dover TAP—on the A20. This protocol is used to manage any mild disruption to the flow of traffic to the Dover port area and has proved effective in reducing the risk of Operation Stack requiring to be activated. The Department for Transport, Highways England and other partners are currently working closely together and with local bodies, particularly the Kent Resilience Forum, to develop contingency plans for the complete replacement of Operation Stack.

It is important to be clear that Operation Stack has been superseded by Operation Brock. This new approach has been designed to ensure that, unlike under Operation Stack, the M20 will be kept open and traffic will continue
to flow in both directions at times of cross-channel disruption. Operation Brock consists of three phases, involving a contraflow queuing system on the M20 and holding areas at Manston airport and, if necessary, on the M26. The contraflow system on the M20 will allow lorries to queue between junctions 8 and 9 of the coast-bound M20. At the same time, other traffic will be able to proceed in both directions on one side of the motorway, with access to junctions.

This represents a significant improvement on previous deployments of Operation Stack, when junctions were closed and traffic diverted off the M20 on to local roads, adversely affecting local communities and businesses in Kent. It is estimated that the Brock contraflow will be capable of holding at least 2,000 HGVs, in addition to the 2,000-plus capacity that the additional spaces at Eurotunnel, the port of Dover and the Dover TAP provide between them. We will therefore have substantial truck-holding capacity while maintaining flow of traffic on the M20 at all times.

We are highly conscious, however, of the need to have even deeper resilience plans in case of levels of disruption that exceed even this capacity. The Government need to plan for all eventualities. In the event of this kind of disruption, which would only occur in exceptional circumstances, we have two further options at our disposal. First, the currently disused Manston airport stands ready to be put into service if needed. It has an enormous runway that can hold up to 4,000 lorries. Then, of course, on the specific subject of today’s debate, plans have been in development for some months now to utilise the M26 to hold lorries should even further capacity be required. To be clear, neither Manston nor the M26 option would ever be deployed if the initial suite of measures had been successful.

These measures can be deployed discretely in response to a specific incident or in sequence as part of an escalation plan. The exact approach to this phasing is in the final stages of development with the Department’s delivery partners. Our preference is for Manston to precede the M26 option, but of course if an emergency is called, any operational decision will be made by the gold command on the day. All measures will be available, with full operational plans developed, by March next year.

The specific points raised by my hon. Friend fall into a number of broad areas. The first is his point about engagement and consultation with affected parties and communities. He focused on consultation. As he is aware, we are already undertaking work on a longer term solution for a lorry-holding scheme. In June and July 2018, Highways England ran a series of public information events on the proposed way forward, and it is currently assessing the responses.

It is becoming apparent that a range of on-road and off-road solutions have received strong support, and those could offer maximum benefit for future network resilience. There will be further public discussion on more detailed proposals when they have been fully worked out, and our aim is for the improved arrangements to be in place by 2023.

Although there has not been a formal consultation on immediate contingency plans to replace Operation Stack, over the past year there has been extensive and more or less continuous engagement. That included the meeting that the Secretary of State and I held in March 2018 with Members for Kent constituencies—as my hon. Friend said, he was unable to attend, but he referred to it in a letter that followed. At that meeting, the Secretary of State outlined his vision for the M26 being used in extreme circumstances as an extra resource. After my hon. Friend wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 April, I invited him to attend a tea surgery on 30 April 2018, and again on 21 May, to discuss our contingency plans. It is therefore not fair to say that no meeting was forthcoming—on the contrary, the normal procedure, which is to have a tea surgery to understand the problem and then to go deeper into it with officials, was available and offered at the time. My officials have also had numerous meetings—more than 40—with local stakeholders and Kent Resilience Forum groups over the past year. Other opportunities to discuss the plans have been available, and used by other Members in correspondence and parliamentary questions.

My hon. Friend refers to comments made by the PCC and Highways England, and there is clearly always the risk of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Highways England has been clear about the need to work on the M26 and its potential role as an option of last resort, and the Secretary of State has held conversations with key local stakeholders. I understand there is agreement on the work to be undertaken and the options that should be explored, but it is important to be clear that no one—certainly no one in my Department, or in Kent or any of the organisations involved—wants to put restrictions on the M20, to have to park lorries at Manston or potentially to close the M26. These are contingency plans. If there is major traffic disruption as the result of action by EU states, we need the best plan possible to mitigate the effects of that, and a plan that works for the whole of Kent and the wider UK economy.

Detailed plans on the system are being developed. My hon. Friend mentioned the wider impact of these measures, and work is being carried out to attempt to understand the nature of the flow of HGVs into Kent, to see whether that can be mitigated in the event of disruption. As part of that, officials are considering the impact on the local network, as well as on the M25. I recognise and share my hon. Friend’s concern about this issue, but we must also consider what the counterfactual would be, and what would happen if lorries were not managed in a planned, co-ordinated and effective way. In the event that we had to close the M26, I appreciate my hon. Friend’s concerns about the impact on Wrotham. However, it would at least benefit from keeping the M20 open, and we know that that is a much more important strategic road, with high traffic flows, including for local traffic.

My hon. Friend raised a question about air quality, and that is inevitably a facet of any congestion on the local network and will be considered as part of the broad assessment. Again, however, the counterfactual applies, and it is important to understand what the impact on air quality would be if we had major traffic disruption without these contingency plans. My hon. Friend asked questions about the involvement of district councils, and all district councils in Kent, including Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, are members of the Kent Resilience Forum and have had the opportunity to get involved in the development of those contingency plans.
The M26 closures are the specific reason for this debate, and under advice, they were deemed to be necessary for the undertaking of survey work that, in this case, was not formally subject to prior notification and, as my hon. Friend noted, ended earlier than the stipulated date. However, I absolutely accept that, given the sensitivity of this particular issue at that particular time, a more proactive and tailored approach to advance communication should have been adopted. That is why I have issued an apology and why we are so clear on that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State feels the same way. The closures should have been notified more widely.

The survey work undertaken included taking core samples from the central reservation area, checking structure heights, assessing the condition of the existing M26 Otford emergency access, taking measurements, assessing 4G signal strength and undertaking drainage surveys. Highways England has confirmed that further overnight closures on the M26 are also planned in November and December. They follow site surveys carried out on the M26 in October. During those closure periods, work will be undertaken to install crossover points in the central reservation, which can be used to direct traffic on to the opposite carriageway. Such crossover points are commonplace on motorways and major A roads across the country. Their purpose is to help Highways England to manage traffic flow during incidents.

The Government are determined to keep the road network moving at times of potential cross-channel disruption for local people, businesses and visitors. That is why we continue to work closely with Highways England and other partners on developing both short-term and longer-term solutions to Operation Stack. On 5 November, I will host a further roundtable with Members of Parliament for Kent constituencies. At that meeting I expect to update Members on current plans and will be happy, as always, to discuss longer-term issues and proposals. It will be another opportunity to help to shape our proposals as they go forward, and I hope that as many Kent constituency Members as possible will attend.

To conclude, we doubt that these contingency measures will be needed, but if they are, then we are doing the necessary planning. If we did have significant disruption at the border resulting in traffic disruption in Kent, then let us be clear there is no panacea and no cure-all, but we want to ensure that we can manage disruption while keeping Kent moving. It is important that we do that in partnership with the key stakeholders working through the existing Kent resilience arrangements. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues and partners to ensure we are well placed to cope with any outcomes.

Question put and agreed to.

4.16 pm

House adjourned.
9.34 am

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): I beg to move, that the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the appetite has now been satisfied and we can proceed with alacrity to business.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**HEALTHCARE (INTERNATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS)**

*Presentation and First Reading* (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Matt Hancock, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, Secretary Esther McVey, Secretary Jeremy Wright and Stephen Barclay, presented a Bill to make provision about paying and arranging for healthcare provided outside the United Kingdom and giving effect to healthcare arrangements; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 279) with explanatory notes (Bill 279-EN).*

9.36 am

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am very grateful for the cross-party support for this Bill. I will not seek to detain the House, as we have other business, but I will take a few minutes to explain why the Bill is important and should continue its passage through the House.

Living in a cold, damp or unsafe home is hell. It damages people's physical and mental wellbeing, erodes the income of the poorest households and impacts on children's education. The most vulnerable tenants are those most at risk of being trapped in substandard accommodation, and they are often the least able to withstand the damage such conditions do, or to fight their corner unaided.

The emails that flow in from constituents—and, indeed, many others, including the hundreds of people who took part in the parliamentary digital involvement exercise before the Second Reading debate—about bad housing conditions make truly heart-rending reading. I am sure that everyone in this House will have received similar representations.

In one of the recent cases that have come to me, a constituent wrote:

“My flat has metal casement windows around 50 years old that were installed when they converted the houses into flats… My kitchen window leaks when it rains. I have video evidence catching water in a bowl as it pours in… The weather is changing into autumn now and I’m worried for my health… it’s difficult to afford to heat my home. I am on benefits so have limited funds. The windows let in a lot of draught so I get very cold in winter. I recently had a level access shower fitted after having spinal fusion surgery last year but in the winter the condensation from the shower forms ice inside the window and it’s freezing in there, everything is damp.”

Another wrote:

“I am tenant of a privately rented accommodation with my partner and two kids… It’s been a struggle to get us out of it as it is not conducive to live in especially for my son who has chronic lung disease, autism, asthma… He was also previously in a coma at St. Mary's hospital due to a virus caused by excessive cold. The mould and damp in the house turns our clothing, toothbrushes and cups black. I cannot begin to explain how many hospital visits we have had with the ambulance coming sometimes twice a day as my son's breathing deteriorated. His GP also wrote them explaining his medical condition and this was also ignored.”

Another wrote:

“Hope all is well. I have been complaining about my freezing cold smelly damp mouldy flat for numerous years. The condensation brings in the cold air from outside that makes my flat extremely freezing cold. I was told to leave my heating on low… I cannot afford to leave the heating on constantly low… in the winter months and when it is really cold I go without food to put the heating on and to try and stay warm. So that has not solved the problem… The cold aches my bones and muscles. The damp and mould affects my asthma. As a type 1 diabetic and asthmatic I am constantly ill living in this flat…”

Those are the kinds of cases that come to all of us.
Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her speech and, indeed, for the entire Bill, which I genuinely believe will make a massive difference. Will she join me in congratulating Newham Council, which has been a pioneer in taking on bad landlords and making sure that our citizens have homes that are fit for habitation?

Ms Buck: I am grateful for that intervention and I will happily congratulate Newham Council, because although it has a problem with its housing stock, it has led the charge on local enforcement. I am happy to give it credit for doing that.

Many landlords take their responsibilities seriously, but still 1 million households across the private and social sectors are forced to endure conditions that harm them or pose a serious risk of harm. According to the latest English housing survey, 15% of private tenanted properties have category 1 hazards classed as a serious risk to the occupier’s health—that is 750,000 households—at least a third of which contain children. A further 250,000 socially tenanted properties have a category 1 hazard under the housing health and safety ratings system, which works out at about 6%.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that it is completely unacceptable that in my constituency families of four are living in a box bedroom with only a single mattress on the floor?

Ms Buck: I totally agree; overcrowding is a scandalous problem in our social housing, and it is often equated with some of the very poor standards people experience, with damp and condensation linked to overcrowding. These are tragic cases and we urgently need not only an expansion of social rented housing to enable people to escape these kinds of conditions, but the provisions in this Bill and other measures that the Government have introduced.

Landlords currently have no obligation to their tenants to put or keep a property in a condition fit for habitation. A requirement does exist to ensure the structure and facilities such as the heating, gas and water are in repair, but this does not cover issues such as fire safety, heating that is functioning but inadequate, or poor ventilation that can lead to the condensation and mould growth seen in the kind of cases I have outlined. A range of fitness issues seriously affect the wellbeing and safety of tenants and about which tenants can do nothing at all.

For private and housing association tenants, it is possible for the local authority to enforce fitness standards under the housing health and safety rating system, under the Housing Act 2004, but there is a huge degree of variability across councils in terms of inspection, the issuing of notices and enforcement rates. About 50% of councils have served none or only one Housing Act notice in the past year. One London council, Newham, which has an active enforcement policy, accounted for 50% of all notices served nationally and 70% of those served in London. A freedom of information inquiry by the Residential Landlords Association found an average of just 1.5 prosecutions per council, and my own freedom of information research found that enforcement action of any kind accounted for only 1% of the estimated number of category 1 hazards. That means there is a complete postcode lottery on the prospect of councils taking steps, with the real prospect being that the council will not do so.

For council tenants, the decent homes standard requires homes to be free from category 1 hazards, and considerable progress was made in improving the quality of housing stock, thanks to the decent homes initiative, but the 2004 Act and housing health and safety rating standards have little impact, as local councils cannot enforce against themselves. So council tenants have no way to enforce, or seek to have enforced, fitness standards, including fire safety, if their landlord does not do anything. The Bill enables all tenants, whether private or social, to take action on the same issues and standards as local authorities can.

Chuka Umunna (Stratham) (Lab): May I shower a huge amount of congratulations on my hon. Friend, because this Bill will make an immediate difference in my constituency? For all the case examples she has described, we see exactly the same thing in my constituency. I am pleased the Government appear to be supporting the Bill. If this Bill passes, we need to make sure that tenants all know that they have this power she is proposing to give them and this ability to enforce their rights. Does she agree that it is important that if the Government are going to support this Bill, they make sure that everybody knows they will be empowered to do something beyond what the local authority can now do for them?

Ms Buck: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his congratulations. I totally agree that in addition to the legislation we pass in this House it is crucial that we use all the tools of government communications to get a message out that people have rights, that they need to be able to exercise them, and that they need to know how and where they can go in order to do so. I am sure that the Minister will support that point.

This Bill will enable all tenants, whether private or social, to take action on the same issues and standards as local authorities, following recommendations made by the Law Commission and the Court of Appeal dating back some two decades. This is therefore very much a legislative updating whose time has come. The effect of the Bill will be that the tenant will be able to take action against the landlord to make them put right any problems or hazards that make their dwelling unfit, and the tenant could seek compensation when the landlord has not done so.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this important Bill. Many of us will have received representations from private landlords who are screaming about the impact of this Bill on their ability to make profit. Let us be absolutely clear: if someone cannot make profit by providing a clean and safe place for people to live, they should exit the game completely.

Ms Buck: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on that. It is also fair to say that the majority of good landlords are happy to endorse that view, because their reputation is dragged down by the behaviour of the rogue minority.

The Bill is not intended as a replacement for the work of local authorities but is complementary to it, enabling tenants to take action where the council has not done so.
or cannot do so. For all new tenancies after the Bill comes into force, it would make it a right to have a home that did not create a risk to the health and safety of its occupants. As the excellent House of Commons Library briefing on the Bill says:

“The Grenfell Tower fire has focused attention on housing standards in the social rented stock and also in privately owned blocks of flats.”

So I am also pleased to say that the Bill was amended in Committee, with the support of the Government, to extend the fitness obligation to the building within which the dwelling forms part. So the tenant of a flat, a room or part of a shared house will be able to enforce against defects, including fire risks, that threaten their health or wellbeing in their home, even if the defect is in another part of the building.

It has been marvellous to have secured Government backing for this Bill, even to the point of strengthening it. We have had support from across the spectrum. It has come from bodies ranging from the National Landlords Association and the Residential Landlords Association, to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health—CIEH—the Association of Residential Letting Agents, Shelter, Generation Rent, the Law Society, Mind, the National Housing Federation, the Local Government Association, Citizens Advice and others.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am delighted to say that the Government have now got behind the Bill, as that is very welcome. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would also be useful if they gave more security to private tenants, because that is necessary to ensure that they are not evicted as a result of reporting faults, and if they restored early legal advice for housing matters, because without that it is going to be difficult to enforce this?

Ms Buck: I totally agree with my hon. Friend on that. This Bill is one tool and there are many others we need to adopt to ensure that tenants have a full range of rights and, indeed, are protected against retaliatory eviction. That is outwith the scope of this Bill, but there is much more we will seek to do and will no doubt be pressing the Government to do, on matters ranging from security of tenure protection to the provision of legal aid and advice services.

I have always believed that politics is a collective effort. For most of us, most of the time, what we do in here is part of a team effort. Although that can sometimes drift into tribalism, there is no shame in the fact that politics is not primarily about what we do as individuals. Private Members’ Bills are one of the few ways in which we, as individual Back-Bench MPs, can make a difference, but in truth this, too, has been a team effort. I am grateful to the Minister and to the officials, who have been brilliant; it has been a joy working with them on this Bill. I also thank all the MPs, from both sides of the House, who spoke on Second Reading, who served in Committee and who are here today to see us through Third Reading.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): May I, too, congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing this important Bill? It has been a pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee. Does she agree that this is a shining example of the huge amounts that can be achieved when Back Benchers work with the Government?

Ms Buck: I do agree with that. In the end, what we want to do here is to make changes, and it is hard for individuals to do that without having that kind of support, including from the Government.

Information, help and lobbying came from all the organisations I have mentioned, and very much from Sam Lister at the Chartered Institute of Housing and Stephen Battersby, the former president of the CIEH. But none of this would have happened without the inspiration and commitment of Justin Bates and Giles Peaker, the housing lawyers who brought forward the concept of this Bill and have given their time and their considerable brains to it for the past three years. I can only offer my inadequate thanks to them for that effort, but I will say that if anyone can claim credit for securing this important step forward in the protection of tenants, it is them. With that, I conclude my remarks and commend this Bill to the House.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and a privilege to be here to support the Bill. I speak as an accidental landlord myself: when my second wife and I got together 10 years ago, she was shrewd enough to want to hang on to the property that she had, just in case it did not work out, and 10 years later we are still renting out that property. I believe that we are excellent landlords, and that is because it makes financial sense and moral sense: if we maintain our property to a high standard, we will retain our tenant. There are, though, parts of the country where that is not the case—where demand outstrips supply. Some 1.2 million houses have been identified as non-decent. That is clearly appalling and I am delighted that the Bill will address it.

In October 2015, legislation was introduced putting an obligation on landlords to provide a smoke detector on each storey of a property and to provide a carbon monoxide detector if the property has solid-fuel-burning appliances, such as a wood-burning stove. I introduced a private Member’s Bill that would have made it an obligation for landlords to provide a carbon monoxide detector in all properties, socially and privately rented, in which any fuel is burned and carbon monoxide produced. That is an absolute necessity to ensure that all homes are fit for human habitation and do not present a danger to the occupants.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some interesting points based on his experience in the social rented sector. Does he agree that no landlord should have any problems with the Bill and that we should be clear that it will create an additional power to help tenants, not replace the powers that councils have?

Eddie Hughes: When we consider how many properties are rented out, for both social and private purposes, it is important that they are all as safe as possible.

Unfortunately, when I became a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, I had to step down from my position as chair of the board of Walsall Housing Group, a housing association with 20,000 properties in Walsall. I had been leaning very heavily on the association to get it to provide carbon monoxide detectors in its
properties, and I believe it now does that for all its new build properties. I shall continue to try to influence the association to do that in its existing social rented properties.

I completely support and endorse all elements of the Bill and look forward to its becoming law.

Mr Speaker: The board is now sadly deprived of the hon. Gentleman’s expertise and commitment, but at least we have been able to enjoy his eloquence today.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I am pleased to be here to support this vital Bill. I commend the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude for her tireless work on this issue, without which we would not be considering the Bill today.

The Bill will make huge leaps in the strengthening of tenants’ rights by ensuring that they have the power to hold their landlords to account if appropriate standards are not being met. That is especially important in the age of generation rent, when the proportion of individuals and families living in the private-rental sector has doubled in the past decade and figures for individuals and families occupying properties in the social-rented sector continue to number in the millions.

Since I became an MP last year, I have been dismayed by the number of constituents who have contacted me with housing issues. Some of my constituents have been left without central heating for up to six months, and others have faced serious fly and rat infestations. By any reasonable account, these situations have made my constituents’ homes inhabitable, yet often they have been powerless to act. I am pleased that these issues are finally getting the attention they deserve, but it is utterly dreadful that it has taken a tragedy as serious as the Grenfell Tower fire to throw into sharp focus the issue of unsafe rented accommodation in this country. Grenfell serves as a harrowing reminder of the difficulties that tenants face in getting their voices heard, and it is right that we act to ensure that a tragedy like that never happens again.

It is simply wrong that in 2018 some 2.5 million to 3 million people are renting homes in which there is a “serious and immediate risk to a person’s health and safety”, as defined by the housing health and safety rating system. I am hopeful that with cross-party support the Bill will give a long overdue voice to those individuals and families.

For many years now, the Government have placed the duty of ensuring that a rented property is fit for habitation on local councils, while simultaneously slashing their budgets by unprecedented amounts and thereby preventing them from taking any meaningful action to fulfil their responsibilities in this policy area—and many others. This is simply not good enough on an issue as pivotal as the habitation of homes. I am hopeful that if the Bill is given its Third Reading today, tenants will be empowered, burdens will be lifted from over-stretched local authorities and the small number of rogue landlords who refuse to resolve issues that make their homes unfit for habitation will be forced to clean up their act.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I wish to make a brief contribution, mainly to congratulate the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) on an excellent piece of incredibly important legislation, which I am glad to support.

Those of us have been following the #ventyourrent campaign initiated by Generation Rent on Twitter have seen incredible squalor in some parts of the private rented sector. Even this week, we have seen on the front page of The Guardian two days in a row incredible examples of problems with repeat offending slum landlords. There is clearly a big problem and I know that Ministers are thinking about it. The Bill, which I hope will be given its Third Reading today, is an important contribution to the empowering of tenants to help to clean up some of these problems. It will not be the end of the story, and we need to think about enforcement and how we can enable it to pay for itself by fining and taking the property of repeat offending slum landlords, but it is a pleasure to support this important legislation today.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of the Bill and to urge the Government to go further. I wish to point out just how serious the issue of poor-quality private rented accommodation is in my constituency and to show why urgent action is so sorely needed.

Just last week, I met a constituent who was desperate for help. She is a single mother who lives in damp terraced accommodation, with mould growing on the walls. She was desperate. Her son and daughter both have problems with their breathing. One of them has asthma and was seeing the doctor about it. She had asked the landlord for help, but he was unwilling or unable to make changes to the property and solve the damp problem. She is applying for a council house, but because of the severe shortage in places such as Reading and Woodley, she is unable to progress quickly up the list of those seeking homes. The woman’s plight explains the seriousness of the issue and why urgent action is needed.

In Reading, nearly a third of houses are in the private rented sector. There are many good landlords, but there are also many who do not provide a good service. Problems with damp, difficulties with landlords and high fees all make for deep-seated problems that affect thousands of local people. At the same time, as was mentioned earlier, councils have few powers to tackle rogue landlords and there are simply not enough good-quality private rented properties or council houses available in many parts of the country. I urge Ministers to take steps to address this serious problem by considering Labour amendments to the Bill and other related measures on the issues that affect the wider housing sector.

Several amendments to the Bill were proposed, and I am grateful to the Government for taking some of them on board. I hope that they will look again at one in particular. Earlier this year, I spoke about the potential loophole that allows landlords to charge for items such as lost keys. That could provide less scrupulous landlords with a loophole through which they could bypass the Bill’s intent. I urge the Government to look into the matter again.
Other changes that are needed include a much larger programme of council house building and wider measures to improve the planning and development sector.

I urge the Government to support Reading Borough Council’s bid for about 140 new council houses and ask them to go much further in considering the funds that are available for council house building. In my area, we could easily find families to fit into another 1,400 council properties, let alone the 140 that have been bid for.

Kevin Foster: I welcome the spirit of the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Does he agree that his local council may well benefit from the removal of the cap on borrowing to fund housing and therefore might be able to fund more of the council houses he is talking about?

Matt Rodda: I do welcome that. My council colleagues tell me that they are waiting for further details from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I look forward to Ministers being more amenable to local authorities on this matter.

To sum up, as time is pressing, poor-quality rented housing is a serious issue for many residents and urgent action is needed to address both the problem of rogue landlords and the problems in the wider housing market.

10 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to give my support to what is a welcome and timely Bill. It is welcome that I am able to speak on this matter. While I was in the Department for Communities and Local Government, I would have been unable to do so, but now that I have the joy of being in the Cabinet Office I can, although I have to be careful not to go into some of the issues around Grenfell, given the ongoing inquiry for which the Cabinet Office is responsible.

It is welcome that the Bill has cross-party support today. In summing up, I know that the Minister will want to reflect on how the Government will take it forward and how they will publicise these rights, as was touched on earlier. A key point to make is that the Bill is about additional powers; it is not about replacing the role of local authorities. That clear message will have to be given through local authorities. I accept that the vast majority of them will act on that basis.

A tenant who makes a housing standards complaint should not just be told that there is now an opportunity to pursue it via a civil route; the Bill is about providing an opportunity to pursue complaints via a civil route in addition to the housing standards enforcement work of local authorities. It would be helpful if, in summing up, the Minister reflected on what promotion and engagement work might be done with local authorities to ensure that that is clear in their approach.

A landlord in my constituency came to see me after my speech on Second Reading, when I said that the Bill was absolutely needed because of the actions of a small number of people. They were concerned about the Bill. I said quite bluntly that if they were concerned about a standard that meant they had to maintain their property as fit for human habitation, they really were in the wrong place entirely. Being fit for human habitation is about the lowest standard one can imagine for a property. It covers basics, such as making sure that the heating is on, that there is not undue damp, that it is safe and that the windows are fixed. It really is not the highest of standards. It is therefore right that there is another way for tenants to enforce it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said, most reasonable landlords will not fear the Bill at all; they have no reason to fear it. If people are maintaining a reasonable property, the Bill is utterly irrelevant to them. It will never have any impact on them; it will not change how they run their business; and it will not cost them any money. The only people who need worry are those who constantly ignore reasonable requests for repairs, those who have just about avoided prosecution on a couple of occasions because their actions did not quite come up to the criminal standard that is used for local authority offences and those who skimp at every opportunity. Those are the landlords who need to worry.

Landlords who are part of a quality assured system and who work closely with groups such as the Devon Landlords’ Association have absolutely nothing to worry about and will see absolutely no change to their business. As I said on Second Reading, the vast majority of landlords provide reasonable properties at a reasonable rent. Those who do not are the ones who will have to think about the implications of the Bill.

As the Bill covers civil matters, when they go to court they will be dealt with on the balance of probabilities, rather than against the criminal standard. Being able to enforce something as a civil matter gives a court slightly more leeway. When things are done to the criminal standard—beyond reasonable doubt—different evidential standards apply.

Eddie Hughes: With reference to recourse to the law, does my hon. Friend recognise that tenants who have complained about repairs are 50% more likely to be evicted?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He will realise that I have to face the House and am not deliberately turning my back on him as I reply. He is absolutely right that if someone makes a legitimate complaint to their local authority or pursues a case under the Bill, there must be clear actions to be taken if so-called revenge evictions take place.

I am conscious that that danger may vary between areas. In some parts of the country, a large amount of housing may be available at reasonable prices, although I accept that affordability is an issue across the country. However, in other places, particularly the area represented by the promoter of the Bill, the cost and availability of housing are huge issues. The threat of having to move out is much more significant in such places than somewhere where people could just move down the road. There is a need to tackle revenge evictions, because if revenge evictions are the result of the Bill, it will not be a success.

Again, the vast majority of landlords respond to complaints fairly and reasonably and will work with their tenant in their mutual interests. If the landlord has a long-standing tenant, they do not have to pay agency fees to relet their property. Likewise, the tenant is able to make more of a life for themselves and does not have the disruption to their family life and their children’s schooling that comes with regular moves.
My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North, as always, brings his vision and knowledge to this debate, and rightly highlights that we must not only ensure that the powers are used, but that revenge evictions do not take place.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What would my hon. Friend say to those who say—I disagree with them—that any legislation that impacts on landlords will have an unwarranted impact on the availability of housing, because people will be more unwilling to rent out their properties in areas where there is already a pressing demand for housing?

Kevin Foster: What I would say to them is, as an Opposition Member said earlier, “If you are renting out a property that is unfit for human habitation, you really should not be in the business of being a landlord. If that is the standard of what you are renting out then, bluntly, we do not want you to carry on.”

Will there be an impact on availability? Possibly, but—and it is a very big but—if someone cannot afford to do a property up to the standard where it is fit for habitation, they have an obvious option, which is to sell the property to someone who can. Another option is to discuss with the local authority whether planning permission needs to be granted to allow for a proper redevelopment.

I recently went to see a superb development in Paignton. It used to be poor-quality, guild house-style accommodation. In theory it was sheltered accommodation, but it was more like guild house-style accommodation, with shared bathrooms and facilities that were not particularly good. It was on the site of a former brewery. It was really not that great and the local housing association took the view that it did not meet the standard. It has been done up properly and there are now 22 new homes.

The new apartments are modern properties that meet modern standards of disability access; the facilities reflect this era, rather than the 1950s; and young families have moved back in.

Let us be clear about what happens when we take action on housing standards. I know my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) will agree with this point; indeed, he probably made his intervention so that I would put it on the record. There is always the theory that when we introduce legislation and take action on housing standards, we might reduce the supply and make it more difficult or more expensive—because if we contract the housing supply, the price clearly goes up—for the tenant to find housing. However, in my experience when enforcement action is taken by local authorities, which will still happen, in many cases it results in the same amount of housing, or even slightly more of it, but this time of the right standard.

If a landlord feels that one of their properties is not up to standard—again, I refer to the landlord with a property in Paignton—they should start engaging with the local authority. Most councils will be reasonable and sensible if a landlord is trying to do the right thing. That could mean looking at how the property is used, perhaps converting the property or getting planning permission to allow the proper redevelopment of the site, as happened in Paignton. I am happy to take another intervention but I think that my hon. Friend can be reassured that, although there is always an argument about how much we do in terms of pushing measures so far that we reduce supply, this Bill will not do that. In fact, it could reduce the supply of completely unsuitable accommodation and increase the supply of the type of rental properties that we want to see.

Let me turn to the matter of implying terms into a lease—a sensible and proportionate measure. For those wondering what that means, this is about how the legislation creates the civil enforcement. Any tenancy will now contain this provision in the lease. As has been said, this is not about bringing back a piece of Victorian legislation, where the maximum rental price is now woefully out of date—probably as historical as the piece of legislation itself. Rather, this is about having a modern piece of legislation that does not come with the idea that every so often we need to decide the maximum rent to which it would apply. That makes this a more secure piece of tenancy legislation.

Following amendment in Committee, it would be interesting to understand how the Bill will affect those who rent out a property in a block where the leaseholders are the freeholders. A concerning issue came out following the fire safety work in Torbay after the Grenfell Tower fire. To be clear, there is not a large local authority owner of tower blocks in Torbay, as some hon. Members might have in their constituencies. We have a lot of apartment blocks and blocks of flats, particularly for those entering retirement, where the leaseholder is the freeholder—that is, the leaseholder owns a share in the freehold—and some of these flats may be rented out. In these cases, the freeholder, who is supposed to be dealing with certain issues and maintaining certain safety standards, has absolutely no incentive to enforce against its own shareholders. In fact, the shareholders are not very keen at all for the freeholder to take enforcement action.

There was an example in my constituency whereby a block had been built in the late 1960s—not a dissimilar era from that of Grenfell Tower. There were two apartments on a floor, which had two fire doors, then the corridor and then the door to the stairwell. About 20 years ago, the owner of one flat bought the other flat on the floor and turned it into one property along the whole floor, so instead of having two doors and the fire door to the stairwell, there was now just a fire door to the stairwell. This had not been picked up, partly because the freeholder had no great incentive to take action against the leaseholder, because the leaseholder was the freeholder. In the Minister’s contribution, she might wish to reflect on whether a tenant of a leaseholder would be able to enforce against the freeholder in such a situation.

Matt Rodda: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a related issue—cuts to fire services—to which he is almost referring in his very thoughtful contribution? I have had representations from Royal Berkshire fire and rescue service about the dire need for more fire safety officers, who take a long time to train. Many properties in multiple occupation actually have multiple fire safety issues, including small adjustments made by landlords and tenants, as the hon. Gentleman has described, and because of the nature of the buildings, which are often old and in some cases dilapidated. I have heard some very concerning stories about this in my county. Will he refer to that aspect?
Kevin Foster: My uncle, Station Officer John Griffin, was for many years a fire safety officer in Plymouth fire service and then Devon fire service, which Plymouth service became. I do not want to get into the grounds that will be covered by the inquiry, as that is not right, but there is an argument about whether the change made just over a decade ago by a previous Government—removing the fire service from being proactively involved in fire safety inspections and very much reducing the role of fire safety officers from the fire service—was the right move.

I put on my hat as a former member of the Local Government Association’s national fire services management committee and as a former member of the west midlands fire and rescue authority, and I do think we should look at rebuilding a more proactive role for the fire service in fire safety. To be fair, I will not criticise everything the previous Government did with the fire service. Some of the measures regarding home fire safety checks and moves to more proactive areas made sense. However, we may well reflect that the changes to fire regulations and moving the fire safety inspections away from the fire service were perhaps not right. Perhaps we will move forward and review that, although there will need to be a balance in outcomes.

Mr Speaker: I very gently say to the hon. Gentleman, to whose contribution in mellifluous tones I am listening with close attention, that he has now spoken for a little longer than the Member in charge of the Bill. I know that he is not the sort of Member who would respond to any exhortation from any quarter to speak at length for any reason, because he just would not do that, but there is a lot of business to get through and I therefore express cautious optimism that he is now approaching his peroration.

Kevin Foster: As always, Mr Speaker, you can incisively see what is happening with my speeches; you have worked out that I was moving towards the end of my remarks. I know that some colleagues will be very disappointed that I am not going to try to break my record for a speech.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks so rarely.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is enjoying this because it is such a rare chance to hear me in the Chamber.

This Bill is very worthwhile, and it is appropriate and proportionate. It has been strengthened in a welcome way in Committee with regard to the provisions on communal areas. I am pleased to support its Third Reading, and look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the points raised during the debate.

10.17 am

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Eighteen years ago in my Notting Hill Housing flat, after prolonged complaints had been ignored, my ceiling collapsed, narrowly missing my young daughter’s head. The five-year battle with my social landlord and the help that I received from my local councillors at the time propelled me into active politics, so I am devastated that social landlords have stepped even further away from their responsibilities over the years. I know from my casework that a collapsed ceiling narrowly missed a young child’s head just recently.

Some residents who attend my surgery have brought photos of the massive cracks across their ceilings—they fear a ceiling collapse—as well as of large gaps in stucco facades, which they fear could fall into the street. However, they have been told by their social landlord that they will not be helped unless they stop talking to me, so little or nothing has changed. That is shameful. I do not need to tell anyone in this House that disrepair followed—if people are lucky—by botched refurbishment can put people in mortal danger. Grenfell Tower residents who complained about their botched refurbishment were sent cease and desist letters, and had no legal recourse.

Since I became an MP last June, my office has dealt with nearly 1,500 cases of all kinds. Around half are housing cases, most involving disrepair. The majority of cases relate to social housing. Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation was among the worst performers, as it has been during my nearly 13 years on the council, but has now improved slightly, leaving Notting Hill Housing—Notting Hill Genesis, as it is now—as our worst performer.

One of my constituents lives in a flat suffering from subsidence, which their landlord has been ignoring. From time to time, due to that subsidence, her front door becomes stuck and she is trapped in her flat for hours. Shame on Notting Hill Genesis. I have told her to call the fire brigade the next time that happens. Another group of constituents who were fleeing domestic abuse with young children were found a place in a hostel where they felt safe, until the ceiling collapsed. They moved downstairs to be safe, but then two more ceilings collapsed. That happened just last year—Notting Hill Genesis again.

Another case involved an elderly and confused woman. Her heating and hot water broke down about a year ago and was not fixed for three months. Her doctor told her that she was close to hypothermia and she then told her neighbour, who luckily reported it to us. Her landlord ignored our pleas, so I put the details on Twitter and there was a response within hours—shame on London and Quadrant. Another constituent’s damp was so bad that he had severe respiratory problems. When I visited, the poor gentleman had to move his nebuliser out of the way to show me the toxic black mould—that was KCTMO.

In yet another case, a constituent who fled from Grenfell with his young child was placed in temporary accommodation in a council flat that was so damp that the toddler’s clothes were literally rotting. Another constituent had a manhole cover in their downstairs kitchen and sitting room that regularly overflowed with raw sewage, by up to a foot. That was Peabody housing. In the last case I shall report on, there were concerns about fire safety that had been reported to a landlord, but were completely ignored. The landlord was told that if they did not fix the problem that they were being emailed about, there would be an explosion. A month later, a massive explosion ripped through the flat. There was a huge fire and a constituent died instantly—that was Catalyst housing.

It is such a difficult and long-winded process to get an environmental health officer to visit a home and manage damp that I have my own damp meter. If we have another very cold wet winter, I will be using it.
extensively and reporting on social media if landlords do not respond, which they often do not, even to an MP. We ask every family that comes to us with problems of damp whether anyone in the family has asthma. So far, every single family reporting damp has at least one such family member. Poor housing is damaging health and sometimes killing my constituents, and until now they have had no legal redress. My office is working on a casework report that will include photos, anonymised examples and timelines of responses from landlords. We will expose the truth. The state of social housing in my constituency is, in many cases, Dickensian.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many of the social landlords mentioned in my hon. Friend’s speech are also active in my constituency, where I have some similar examples to hers. Does she share my concern that many of them started as charities and, by behaving in the way that they are and not delivering quality housing, they are breaching their charitable objectives?

Emma Dent Coad: I agree. Many of them have become developers with social purpose, as they are called, and have lost their charitable status—and they have left it well behind. Many are focusing on building new and often poorly constructed developments, while letting their old stock decline, and they are then selling into the private market. This is deliberate. Tenants are ignored, derided and, on occasion, bullied, with their pleas ignored. They need this legal recourse, so I am delighted to support the Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), a dedicated and hard-working heroine, and I ask the House to pass it.

10.23 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), whose hard work and dedication to improving the lives of tenants has got this Bill to where it is today. We need no more stark reminder of the dangers of housing hazards and unfit properties than the Grenfell Tower disaster, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) mentioned when he spoke up so determinedly for his constituents about the severe risks that they see in their property. This disaster cannot be allowed to happen again.

The Bill can be the foundation of ensuring that we never see tenants housed in such unfit accommodation ever again. It gives tenants direct rights to compel social and private landlords—my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) just highlighted the importance of including social landlords in the measure, and her comments also brought to the fore the importance and imperative nature of the Bill, which comes not a moment too soon—to carry out repairs if their accommodation is not fit for habitation and presents a serious and immediate risk to their health and safety. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) rightly highlighted that, given the number of private rented sector properties in his constituency. He also talked about the growing issues that will come as the sector looks only to expand.

The Bill is undoubtedly a positive step for tenant safety, but the Government must do more to empower tenants to challenge unfair conditions if the Bill is to reach its full potential. The Government must ensure that tenants do not fear retaliatory action when they complain about unfair conditions, as the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) rightly pointed out in his intervention. Unfortunately, a study by Citizens Advice showed that the current measures against retaliatory evictions are simply not working, with local authorities not reporting a downturn in evictions as a result of the Deregulation Act 2015. Protection against retaliatory eviction is vital to the Bill’s success, so will the Government listen to groups such as Citizens Advice and Shelter, and introduce a Bill on the back of their consultation to make three-year tenancies the norm and to give tenants the security they need, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)?

We saw news this week about the fact that despite the introduction of the Government’s rogue landlords register, some landlords who have been deemed in law to be unfit to let properties continue to be rewarded with rental income, including from the public purse as a result of housing benefit. The landlord register is not being properly used as it might be, and it is also not public. Is this not an opportunity to give that mechanism real meaning, to use it properly and to give consumers their full rights by enabling them to see where rogue landlords are in operation? Such measures would have made the Bill even stronger, but we are very pleased to see it finally reach Third Reading. We hope that it will put an end to the scourge of unfit housing once and for all.

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Thank you—[Interruption.] Get on with it, absolutely—God almighty! I just think that this is an important Bill and it needs all the time and love that it can have.

Before I start my speech, I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial interests. I thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for everything she has said and congratulated her for tenaciously taking this Bill through Committee and bringing it to the House today. Her Bill is an important part of our work to raise awareness of this vital issue of standards in rented properties. I want to talk about rented houses and flats, both social and private, and the sort of unacceptable conditions that some tenants have to put up with. Many Members have already mentioned the minority of landlords who do not think that they need to comply with the law, and how their tenants suffer as a result. I would also like to describe some of the new requirements we have brought in to help improve the lives of tenants and make sure rogue landlords are either driven out of the sector or forced to sort out their properties and their attitude. The hon. Lady’s Bill is an extremely valuable part of this work.

We had, I felt, a very productive, interesting and worthwhile debate in Committee. I am going to set out the other work we are doing to help tenants, which
includes some new requirements but also makes sure we sharpen the tools we already have. In England, privately rented houses and flats provide housing for 4.7 million households—20% of all households. The social rented sector provides a further 17%, another 3.9 million households. The majority of these are safe, secure, warm and dry.

People are tenants for all sorts of reasons—maybe the flexibility is convenient for them, maybe it makes more financial sense or perhaps it means they can live in the area they want to. Some 84% of tenants in the private rented sector and 81% of social housing tenants have said they are satisfied with their accommodation. These tenants have already seen an improvement in the quality of the houses and flats they live in. In 2008, serious category 1 health and safety hazards would have been found in around 30% of properties in the private rented sector and 15% in the social sector. By 2016, those figures had fallen to 15% of private rented and 6% of social properties.

However, it is still not acceptable that there is a hard-core, stubborn minority of landlords who rent out places that are not fit for their tenants to live in. Not all tenants have the luxury of choosing where to live, and some of the most vulnerable people in society live in these unfit properties. It is precisely this minority of houses and flats which still have serious hazards that the Bill will help to tackle.

We have been working hard to improve housing conditions and tackle rogue landlords. For example, since 2015 landlords must install a smoke detector on every floor of their properties, and they must have carbon monoxide detectors where the heating comes from solid fuels. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) on all the work he has done on that issue.

We also used the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to give local authorities tough new powers to tackle rogue landlords and poor property conditions in their areas. If landlords do not comply with legal notices served on them because their properties are not safe to live in, local authorities can now impose civil penalties of up to £30,000. Bristol City Council, for example, has imposed 12 civil penalties, with the lowest at £628 and the highest at £25,800. Local authorities do not even have to take rogue landlords to court to give them that short, very sharp shock, and they can use the revenue to further fund their enforcement activities. That is hugely important for council finances.

As well as that, if tenants have had to live with a serious health and safety hazard in their house or flat and the local authority has served a legal notice on their landlord, they may be able to reclaim up to 12 months’ rent. If the rent was paid through benefits, the local authority can get that back, too. Really serious offenders can have their name added to the new database of rogue landlords and property agents and could be banned from being a landlord, possibly for life.

In addition to those powers, we have extended the licensing of houses in multiple occupation. These properties are occupied by tenants who are not related but who share facilities such as bathrooms and kitchens. They are often good value and form a useful part of the housing market for many tenants. However, they are higher risk. Landlords of larger HMOs—those on three or more floors with five or more tenants—require a licence issued by the local authority for each property. On 1 October this year, we extended that to include HMOs with one or two storeys and five or more tenants. We have also introduced requirements for minimum room sizes, to help prevent some of the overcrowded conditions that local authorities have reported to us.

I am pleased to say that this is the third private Member’s Bill introduced by a Labour Member that this Government have supported, following the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, which was promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and received Royal Assent in September, and the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill, which was promoted by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and is now in the other place.

The Bill before us builds on the work that has been done and adds a new dimension to the fight against rogue landlords. It will empower tenants by allowing them to seek redress from their landlords if their rented house or flat is in an unacceptably dangerous condition. Landlords will have to keep their properties free from hazards from the outset and for the entirety of the tenancy. Tenants will be able to seek redress without having to rely on their local authority, if they prefer to, and local authorities will still have the same strong enforcement powers to serve legal notices where they find serious health and safety hazards.

No further obligations will be put on landlords who rent out safe, secure, warm and dry properties. If a landlord is quick to carry out repairs when they are reported, manages their property well and takes their responsibilities seriously, the effect the Bill will have on them will be to level the playing field. Rogue landlords will have to improve their properties or leave the business. Landlords who do not maintain safe properties prevent an effective and competitive rental market where all landlords operate on an equal footing.

It is those two aspects of the Bill—giving more power to tenants but putting no new obligations on good landlords—that allow it to sit so well with the range of initiatives we have already introduced. The Bill will give power to tenants, which will complement the existing powers and further enforcement options we have provided to local authorities. Good landlords have nothing to worry about because there are no new obligations or costs for them under the Bill.

It was reassuring to hear such support and general agreement from Members across the House on Second Reading. That is a testament to how seriously all parties take this issue. In Committee in June, I once again heard cross-party support for the Bill and agreement that we need to act now. Members drew attention to issues in the private and social rented sectors that concerned them, and no one argued against the Bill.

Amendments were made in Committee that have further tightened the provisions of the Bill and made it more effective. For example, the common areas of rented properties will now be included. That is important because properties with common areas such as shared stairwells can be at a higher risk from hazards such as fire, as we have heard. Tenants need to be confident that they can hold their landlord to account when it comes to health and safety hazards in those common areas. That amendment will further help tenants in properties such as houses in multiple occupation.
The Bill will extend tenants’ rights and, for the first time, allows them to seek redress if their landlord rents them a property that is not fit for human habitation. It is vital that tenants understand their rights and know how to use them, as Members have said. Subject to the Bill receiving Royal Assent, we will produce guidance for tenants that will explain their rights and how to represent themselves in court should that prove necessary. We will also signpost where and how they can get any support they might need. That guidance will complement the “How to” series of guides produced by my Department, which have recently been revised and expanded. The guides include checklists for new and existing tenants, landlords and letting agents. Whatever the circumstance, we want to ensure that tenants are armed with information, so that they know their rights and responsibilities and can challenge poor behaviour.

There is still more to do. Our support for the hon. Lady’s Bill is an important part of our programme of work to drive up standards in rented houses and flats, and that support does not sit in isolation. We recognise the important role that landlords play in providing homes to millions of people around the country. We want to bring fairness to the market and promote good practice. It is key to the Bill that landlords ensure their properties are fit for human habitation.

Whether a house or flat is fit is determined by the presence of serious hazards. Those hazards are set out in the housing health and safety rating system—or the HHSRS, as it is nattily known. The HHSRS focuses on the hazards that are most likely to be present in housing. Tackling those hazards makes homes healthier and safer to live in. As part of our ongoing work to improve standards, we will commission a review to ensure that the HHSRS continues to work well, and that will take place next year.

Tenants are, of course, at the heart of the Bill. The intention behind it is to empower tenants, which is our intention as a Government. We have introduced legislation banning letting agents from making unfair and hidden charges, making it easier for tenants to find a property at a price they are willing to pay and saving renters an estimated £240 million in the first year alone. In addition, we have announced plans to make client money protection mandatory for letting agents and will introduce requirements on training and accreditation to ensure that tenants are protected. We will further empower tenants by requiring all landlords to belong to a mandatory redress scheme. The work the Government have already done to improve conditions for tenants, as well as the work we are now doing and the hon. Lady’s Bill, will mean a real improvement for tenants and a serious driving up of standards in both the social and rented sectors.

I want to thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), and my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Walsall North, for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) for all their contributions today and in Committee. I am grateful for all the hard work on the Bill across the House.

To conclude—

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Oh!

**Mrs Wheeler:** I could go on, if my hon. Friend would like me to.

It is clear that there is support for the Bill across the House. The Bill will empower tenants and help to further improve standards in rented houses and flats. It has been a pleasure working with the hon. Member for Westminster North, and I am sure her Bill will get the continued support it deserves as it progresses.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*
Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

REFORM OF CIVIL PARTNERSHIP

'(1) The Secretary of State must make regulations to change the law relating to civil partnership to bring about equality between same-sex couples and other couples in terms of their future ability or otherwise to form civil partnerships.

(2) Regulations under this section must give effect to such equality within 6 months of this Act being passed.

(3) For the purposes of this section, “other couples” means couples who but for the provisions of section 3(1)(a) of the Civil Partnership Act 2004 would be eligible to register as civil partners of each other.’—[Tim Loughton.]

Brought up, and read the First time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 1, page 3, line 12, leave out clause 2.

10.40 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

May I pay tribute to the Minister who has just spoken, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler)? Her speech was a masterpiece of clarity, conciseness and succinctness on a Friday morning on which there is time ever, gay and straight people will have the same choices in life, which will be achieved by new laws to extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. There are now some 3.3 million such couples cohabiting in the United Kingdom. That was welcome news, and I was expecting a call beforehand from the Government to discuss how we could collaborate on my Bill to bring about that Government policy in the speediest and most effective way.

The change was of course spurred on by the ruling of the Supreme Court on 27 June, in the case of Steinfeld and Keidan, which revealed that the Government were in breach of the European convention on human rights. That followed a nearly four-year battle by Rebecca and Charles, which was almost as long as my own campaign in Parliament on this subject. I have proposed amendments going back as far as the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, I had a subsequent private Member’s Bill and of course there is the ballot Bill that we are debating today.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: Of course I will give way—not too often.

Sandy Martin: May I offer the hon. Gentleman my congratulations on achieving this step forward? As he will remember, I intervened on him on Second Reading about the necessity of treating everyone equally according to the law. Obviously, everyone could be treated equally badly; I am glad that everyone is now going to be treated equally well.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman quite rightly spoke very eloquently and with his own personal experience in support of this part of the Bill on Second Reading, for which I was very grateful, and that was very effective.

As I say, I was not warned about this advance in Government policy by the Prime Minister, and I have not really been briefed since about exactly what it amounts to. At the moment, I have no idea whether the Government will now accept this new clause, will vote against it, or will allow debate to go on—perhaps beyond 2.30 pm today. Frankly, if there are objections from the Government, I hope they will be based on fact, not conjecture or some of the scare stories about what my new clause might actually achieve. However, I have been involved in some very helpful discussions with the lead officials in the Government Equalities Office on civil partnerships legislation, and of course the continued support of the excellent lead official from the Home Office on this Bill, Linda Edwards.

The problem the new clause addresses is that at no point have the Government indicated a timeline or a method for bringing the extension of civil partnerships into effect. Delay and obfuscation was a major criticism in the ruling by the Supreme Court earlier in the year. More than three months after the Supreme Court ruling, the Government have simply indicated that they will address the inequality by extending civil partnerships, rather than abolishing them. Abolishing them was never a practical option, but that confirmation is very welcome.

Four months on, the Government have not indicated a timeline, despite the urgency factor pressed by the judges. If we read the Supreme Court ruling, we can see
that it absolutely highlights the fact that the Government could have acted before now. On several occasions, it refers to this private Member’s Bill and my previous one as a way of rectifying this matter. It actually criticises my private Member’s Bill for not being tougher in proceeding with a change in the law on a timeline, rather than just agreeing to have a report, which I had to do to get the Bill through Second Reading and into Committee.

My Bill, with the addition of this new clause, is actually very helpful to the Government on a number of fronts. It confirms in law that civil partnerships will be equalised and that the breach with the convention will be rectified. It gives a clear cut-off date for the Government to get on and do it, and it would be effective before the end of next year. If this change goes through, a couple who have been looking to have a civil partnership rather than a marriage—for all the reasons we have debated at length—could make plans from the end of next year to make that a reality. Many people have waited years, and the Government have been on notice about this for years. This is now the time to end the delay.

Crucially, the new clause makes no prescription about the method, wording and reach of the legislative change that is required; that is entirely up to the Government. I know there are some technical matters still to be settled, and I do not want to dictate to them how we achieve that. That is why this is a very flexible amendment to what is a very flexible Bill.

I am afraid that the Government have had plenty of time. Back in the Second Reading debate on 2 February, the then Minister stated at the Dispatch Box about this Bill:

“There is a sense of urgency—very much so.”—[Official Report, 2 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1122.]

Yet, since that time, the Government have not been able to report on the progress of the review work that was announced then, and they did not do so in Committee in July either. Indeed, I gather that the Government Equalities Office was given the go-ahead to undertake much of the review work only in the past few weeks.

I remind the House that that is on the back of two full-blown reviews in the past few years of the whole subject of extending civil partnerships. This must be the most over-reviewed piece of legislation that this House has seen for some time. Why has it all moved so slowly, not least since the Supreme Court ruling that made it inevitable that the law would have to change—and change quickly? I pay tribute to the Equal Civil Partnerships campaign and to the now well over 130,000 people who have signed its petition for a change in the law. They are understandably growing impatient, and despite the Government’s announcement, they are sceptical in thinking that the legislative changes will be kicked into the long grass.

I gather that the Government plan to bring forward primary legislation in the next Session. That has been indicated in a written ministerial statement released only this morning—at the last moment. I am always rather sceptical of ministerial statements from the Dispatch Box or in written form at the eleventh hour. However, even if there is primary legislation in the next Session, it might be 2021 before a couple could actually take advantage of a civil partnership, and that is only if it is in the Queen’s Speech and survives the vagaries of the parliamentary timetable, which is likely to be under huge pressure during the next Session from potential emergency Brexit-related legislation.

I am afraid, however, that is just not good enough for me, for campaign supporters—including those with life-limiting conditions who are desperate to formulate a relationship while they can—or indeed for the Supreme Court. My Bill is the cleanest and quickest way to change the law, to satisfy the Supreme Court and, most importantly, to address a significant pent-up demand from couples who have waited for this change and the chance of equality for a long time. I cannot understand why the Government have not more proactively used my Bill as a vehicle for achieving that right from the start.

Ministers have put it around that the new clause is flawed and unworkable, but neither is true. I have discussed its wording and terms at length with Clerks of the House and lead officials from the Government Equalities Office, and because of flexibility in the wording of the Bill and new clause, the timetable can be achieved by using a truncated six-week review process. Indeed, the Scottish Parliament is currently undertaking its own review into the extension of civil partnerships, and I am sure that it would not mind if we just nicked that. A ready-made “one we made earlier” is on the table, and with a little tweaking it could go into the consultation process in a matter of weeks. A statutory instrument could then be designed in the new year, to be drafted by parliamentary counsel and put before Parliament ahead of the summer recess. I know that will be tight and demand a lot from officials—frankly, those officials would be better placed if they had been allowed to get on with the work when the writing was on the wall some time ago. However, it can be achieved in a way that enables the law to allow opposite-sex couples to enter a civil partnership before the end of 2019. That is what the new clause would do. The statutory instrument route gives greater flexibility on a subject which, frankly, we have debated almost to death. It is less vulnerable to the vagaries of the parliamentary timetable than primary legislation.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Has my hon. Friend considered civil partnerships when the relationship is platonic, such as between siblings who live together, and how to protect their future?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes a fair point that has been raised several times. Indeed, an amendment to the Civil Partnership Act 2004 has been tabled in the other place to that effect. I have some sympathy with those changes, but for me they are largely a matter of taxation and an issue for the Treasury, because they mainly concern inheritance tax and other tax matters. My Bill is a social family Bill, and one reason for it is an attempt to cement family units and create greater stability for children—recognising a partnership in law, with all the protections that goes with that, is a good fillip for family stability. The point raised by my hon. Friend is a separate and largely financial issue, and I would be sympathetic to separate legislation that will not mess up my Bill but will address that point elsewhere.
Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My hon. Friend knows that I support him in his endeavours. Given his response to our hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), perhaps the Government should indicate that they will consider taxation relationships between people who have a relationship but not a partnership. That may involve siblings, or someone who has stayed at home to look after an elderly parent, but the current taxation arrangements are desperately unfair. However, my hon. Friend is right to say that that issue should not necessarily complicate the Bill.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is right. This Bill is about civil partnerships, which are a different sort of relationship. I know the issue is fraught with all sorts of nuances, but my original point stands.

Just this week, the Government announced that primary legislation could be introduced to prescribe food labelling in the light of the recent death of a customer of Pret a Manger and that those measures could be in place by next summer. No Supreme Court ruling hangs over that. I doubt she would never know, she is 20.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Loughton: I will give way for the very last time, and then I will conclude my remarks.

Kevin Foster: Like my hon. Friend, I am keen for the provisions in the Bill to be introduced. Will he outline briefly why his new clause only covers provisions on civil partnerships when, for example, we have been waiting to get mothers’ names on marriage certificates for many years?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend pre-empts my closing remarks. If there is a problem getting this Bill through the House, it must be one of the most complicated private Member’s Bills there has ever been, which is my fault. It so happens, however, that all four tenets of the Bill are now Government policy, so there should not be a problem. We still have some way to go before, hopefully, the Bill passes to another place and becomes subject to the vagaries there. If we do not get there, there is the important issue of adding mothers’ names to wedding certificates—that has been an anomaly since the reign of Queen Victoria and should have been addressed ages ago. Now at last we can do it.

The Bill contains important provisions on allowing coroners to look into certain stillbirths, and again, huge cross-party support for that has been aired on many occasions. There are also other important matters regarding how we view stillbirths before the 24-week gestation period. This Bill is not just about civil partnerships; it is about a whole load of other things for which there is widespread support. I hope that the Government will see that the new clause is well intended and will hold the feet of officials to the fire as they work long hours to get this legislation through. It is achievable. I have tabled new clause 1 in the spirit of being helpful to the Government in achieving equality. Consequential amendment 1 has now become redundant, because it is now Government policy to allow civil partnerships, and the new clause will ensure that we get on with it.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): When warned that I might be speaking early, Madam Deputy Speaker, I had not expected it to be this early.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has raised important points, and I am grateful to him for having promoted this Bill in its entirety and for his enormous and, as he pointed out, long-standing campaigning work in support of civil partnerships.

As most hon. Members will know, when the Bill was first introduced back in February, the Government had not yet taken a final decision on the future of civil partnerships. We were clear that the current situation, in which same-sex couples can marry or enter a civil partnership but opposite-sex couples can only marry, needed to be addressed. Indeed, earlier this year, we published a Command Paper that set out how we would proceed with our deliberations to ensure that we chose the right course of action. Events over the past few months have moved on substantially, not least thanks to the efforts of my hon. Friend in promoting this Bill, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister recently announced our intention to make civil partnerships available to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples. We intend to introduce specific legislation to do just that, and I know that in conversation with my hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities made those intentions clear.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When?

Caroline Nokes: If the hon. Gentleman has no patience, I will come to that in due course.

Chris Bryant: I have no patience.

Caroline Nokes: I can hear that the hon. Gentleman has no patience at all—that may not be news to the Chamber.

Chris Bryant: Play nice!

Caroline Nokes: I shall undertake to play nicely with the entire House today, because there are some really important components to the Bill and I feel hugely passionate about the inclusion of mothers’ names on marriage certificates—I do not, however, hope that my young daughter will be in a position to demand my name on her marriage certificate any time soon, but you never know, she is 20.

I am very conscious that my hon. Friend’s amendment has the support of a large number of right hon. and hon. Members from across the House. We support the common objective of an early move to enable opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships. We made clear our position and the reasons for our concerns about the amendment in a written statement laid this morning by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities.
11 am

My hon. Friend made a point about the written statement being somewhat at the eleventh hour. I am going to play nicely, but I would gently chide him back by saying that his amendment was also somewhat at the eleventh hour, particularly as the Bill went through an intense Committee stage in which right hon. and hon. Members had the opportunity to debate it very fully. Of course, we would not want to be in a position where we do not have an opportunity to debate the amendment and consider the issue properly. None of us wants to still be debating the Bill at 2 o'clock this afternoon and not have the opportunity to make the progress that we want to make on other Bills further down the Order Paper.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I do not want to delay the Bill; I want us to get through the business with all speed. It was for that reason that I read the written statement very carefully. It discloses nothing to me that should mean the Government cannot support the Bill promoter's new clause 1. Will the Minister just indicate whether she will support the new clause, so that we can get on and get the Bill through?

Caroline Nokes: There are a number of important points I would like to make with particular reference to the amendment and some of the challenges we think it poses. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will be patient and allow me to get to them.

There are a number of reasons why we are concerned about my hon. Friend's amendment and a number of reasons why the Bill may not be the most appropriate legislative vehicle in which to equalise access to civil partnerships between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. As I have said, the Bill contains a number of important measures that we certainly do not wish to jeopardise by allowing the substantive amendment on civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples as well as same-sex couples. We particularly supported this original requirement, as we see consultation prior to the implementation of the extension of civil partnerships as key in both helping us to set out the Government's views on the issues I have just mentioned, as well as getting a broader view of the implications of the various options.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend will acknowledge, of course, that the requirement for review and consultation is not a statutory requirement. It did not need to be in the Bill, but it was the only way of getting it through. And of course the Government, by their own admission, have started that review and consultation, albeit at a late stage. Taking the clause out of the Bill does not mean that it stops it, so it is actually not required.

Caroline Nokes: This is a subject on which we conduct long conversations, reviews and consultation across the Government, and the fact that the review has started does not mean that it should stop, but we do want to conclude it. It is important to us to have those views.

The Government are keen to progress the review and to do so as quickly as possible. The planned consultation is not some sort of prevarication; it is a necessary step to help us to ensure that when we introduce legislation it is fit for purpose and does not slow down its parliamentary passage. Officials are already starting to identify all the matters on which we want to consult. I hope that we will soon be in a position to say more about our proposed timing for that consultation, but we wish to conduct it as soon as possible. I stress that the consultation will be about how we make the provisions to ensure that civil partnerships work as intended for opposite-sex couples, not about whether we intend to extend them in that way.

Sandy Martin: Will the Minister accept that it is not just about how; it is also about when? Given that there is a High Court ruling against her, she needs to move quickly.

Caroline Nokes: It is about how and we are proceeding. We are determined to do it. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the court judgment. The hon. Member for Rhondda says we are doing nothing. In fact, the reality is very much that we are seeking to move forward on this as quickly as we can, but we do think that consultation is important.

However other people may view civil partnerships, our intention is clear. They are intended to have at least one thing in common with marriage: to be a formal bond between couples in a loving relationship. I do not wish to digress too much, but a couple of hon. Members raised this point. I am aware, however, that there are those in this place and the other place who wish to see civil partnerships extended to sibling couples. We do
not consider that to be a suitable amendment to either my hon. Friend’s Bill or to a future Government Bill to extend civil partnerships. In the context of today’s debate, I merely note that the addition of substantive amendments on civil partnerships to my hon. Friend’s Bill would make it an easier target for amendments on siblings that would then wreck the Bill, and all its valuable provisions on marriage registration and pregnancy loss would be jeopardised. I note that there is already a Bill in the other place that proposes the extension of civil partnerships to sibling couples. We consider that that Bill, rather than this one, offers an appropriate opportunity to debate the merits of how cohabiting sibling couples should be protected in older age.

The amendment put forward today introduces a wide-ranging delegated power. This causes us concern for several reasons, as I mentioned earlier. We are not yet in a position to know precisely what will be required legislatively, which is why it would be too risky to take a power to change the law by secondary legislation when we are not yet able to explain how we intend to use that power.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): When does the Minister think the Government will be in a position to understand the scope of legislative changes that are needed? Does she plan to publish a further written statement setting out to the House that information once she has it?

Caroline Nokes: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is best placed to make written statements on this matter rather than me, but we will provide as much detail to the House as we possibly can. Hopefully, that will be provided as soon as possible.

The Bill, as introduced, contained provisions for such a power to be included, but those provisions were removed in Committee as we did not wish to provoke parliamentary opposition in either place that could prevent the Bill as a whole from proceeding. Those are the reasons why our preference would be to introduce our own Bill in the next session to extend civil partnership as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity is available, which is what my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities has indicated in her written statement. However, I do not want anyone to think that the Government are merely paying lip-service to the need to press on with resolving this matter.

Government research that was originally due to conclude next autumn has already been brought forward by a year. It has been wound up and officials are now using its findings to help with the impact assessment for the new civil partnerships. The Government Equalities Office has also been in contact with Departments across Whitehall to begin discussions on how to undertake the necessary legislative sweep and with its counterparts in the devolved Administrations to identify UK cross-border issues that will need to be considered.

I am very conscious of the keen interest that Members of both Houses take in extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples and of the private Member’s Bill brought forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and her continued support for our introducing measures through that Bill. In addition, as I have said, a Bill has also been introduced in the Lords on this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has pursued this matter with passion and enthusiasm, and these are legislative proposals that will get on to the statute book, but we are keen to do so in the right way. I hope that this reassures the House that the Government are working hard to extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, as well as same-sex couples, despite not being able to actively support his new clause for the reasons I have outlined.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Minister speaks in riddles. Is she saying that the Government are not actively supporting my hon. Friend’s excellent amendment and new clause and so will abstain, or is she saying that the Government are opposing them?

Caroline Nokes: I think I made it clear that we are not actively supporting my hon. Friend’s amendments, but he has done an excellent job over the last few days of making sure he has enormous support for his amendments both on paper and in the House today.

Sir Christopher Chope: I take it from that that, because of the forces lined up against the Government, they are throwing in the towel, which is good and encouraging news. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the progress he has made.

I despair at the way the Government have been dragging their feet over this issue for so long. It was on 21 May 2013—more than five years ago—on the Third Reading of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 that I intervened on the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and Minister for Women and Equalities asserting that I believed that doing what the Government were doing in that Bill would be in breach of human rights law. The answer from the Minister, obviously on the advice of Government lawyers, was that the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights would not be compromised by the fact that the legislation made unequal provision for civil partnerships.

How wrong were the Government and the Minister! For five years people have been in limbo, while the Government have connived over legislation that is at odds with human rights requirements under the European convention. Surely there must be a greater sense of urgency from the Government than was demonstrated in my right hon. Friend’s response to the new clause. I also find it extraordinary that today’s written statement makes no mention of the Supreme Court ruling.

I hope that when the new clause and amendment are put to the vote, they will go through without a Division, but if there is a Division, I will be interested to see whether the Government try to argue against what the Prime Minister has already assured us of—namely, that the Government are on the side of the proposal in the new clause.

Chris Bryant: I will be very brief. I just want to explain to the Minister why I feel very impatient—she looked grumpy with me for complaining that she was taking a long time. She used words such as “soon”, “as soon as possible” and “quickly”, and while Ministers often use those words, they mean absolutely nothing in parliamentary language.
[Chris Bryant]

On the Minister’s timetable, we might get a Bill in the next Session, but I would not be surprised if the next Session was a two-year Session, like this one, which might mean us waiting another two and a half years. Every year, I have straight people coming to my surgeries who had lived with a partner of the opposite gender for years and years in a relationship that had felt in every respect like a marriage, but who never wanted to enter into a marriage and consequently suffered when their partner died due to a lack of a legal arrangement because civil partnerships were not available to them. They suffer exactly the same distress as gay couples did until civil partnerships were brought into law.

11.15 am

We must reflect on the misery and anguish that such people feel when lawyers then say, “Well, you could have got married but chose not to. Obviously your partner did not intend you to succeed to the tenancy”—or get the house, or whatever it is. Everybody should be treated equally under law and we should all be impatient about that. The right hon. Lady is a wonderful Minister, however, and I am sure she will rush away from the House today determined to make sure that her timetable is beaten, and that we have all this sorted out in months, not years.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 2

Report on civil partnership

Amendment made: 1, page 3, line 12, leave out Clause 2

—[Tim Loughton.]

Third Reading

11.17 am

Tim Loughton: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time. I said at the beginning of my previous remarks that this morning would be a breeze. There have been a few headwinds, but so far, so good. I hope we can continue in that spirit of agreement and consensus across the House regarding all four measures in the Bill, which are much needed and much supported. My Bill has been referred to as the hatch, match and dispatch Bill because it covers so many junctures in people’s lives. I like to view it rather more as a Bill to address anomalies and iniquities in the law that, in many cases, should have been dealt with a long time ago.

I want to apologise in advance to officials, because if the Bill now goes through as amended, as I hope will be the case, they will have a lot of work to do in a relatively short space of time, but we now have a timeline, and that work should be a welcome distraction for them from Brexit, so there are upsides as well as downsides.

There are four aspects of the Bill, as I have mentioned. Clause 1, which is about marriage registration, seems to have excited the most vociferous support this morning. I am sure that the Minister will actively support it, rather than not actively support it—she appeared to say earlier that she did not like new clause 1 but would not actively oppose it, although passively she would have done. But we have moved on to Third Reading now—we are on the final bend.

I pay tribute to the Bishop of St Albans for the Bill that he has steered through the Lords, ably supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), whose name is attached to it on today’s Order Paper, albeit somewhat later on. She has been a champion for this issue over many years, as have other Members who have attached their names to various private Members’ Bills to try to address this anomaly. It is absurd that mothers have been able to put their signatures on marriage certificates in Scotland since 1855—and indeed in Northern Ireland —and in respect of civil partnerships in England and Wales since 2004, but that not since Victorian times has a mother’s name been recognised on a marriage certificate.

On Second Reading, I produced my own marriage certificate. My dear late mother’s name is absent from it, and to add insult to injury, my father’s name is on it twice, because he signed not only as witness but as the vicar who married us, adding double insult to injury. There are countless cases of people saying, “I never knew my father because he assaulted my mother and did a runner on us before I ever knew him, yet his name has to go on my marriage certificate, and the name of my mother, who has done all the heavy lifting, suffered all the abuse, and brought up, nurtured and loved me as a daughter, does not appear.” That is not right. I hope that the Bill will at last address that anomaly and that mothers can then proudly put their names on the marriage register in the new electronic form, which will bring it up to date for the future.

I am not going to go into the second aspect of the Bill, which is civil partnerships, at length again. We have been debating the matter since the 2013 same-sex marriage Bill. If my amendment had been agreed at that time, we would not still be having this discussion now. There have been many opportunities to address this unintended inequality.

Sir Christopher Chope: Since the Government are in the mood to apologise for all sorts of historical events, does my hon. Friend think they should apologise for getting the law completely wrong?

Tim Loughton: I am in a generous frame of mind this morning, and rather than their saying sorry, we should be saying hurrah that we are now doing something about it—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hurrrah!”] I do not know how Hansard will treat that.

The third aspect of the Bill relates to the production of a report on the registration of pregnancy loss. Again, clause 3 has already achieved its objective, partly in the light of our Second Reading debate, which we had back on 2 February, when we were all moved by the extraordinarily touching personal testimony of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) about her own experiences—I wonder whether she will draw her attention away from her mobile phone, because I know she would like to listen to this tribute and not be distracted. As a result of the strength of feeling in the speeches and the subsequent response from our constituents, the then Health Secretary—he is now Foreign Secretary—said, “Well, actually I think we just need to get on with changing the law.” A group was set up with a mandate to see how we could change the law to acknowledge in some way those births that are stillborn but happen, by whatever quirk,
to fall below the 24-week gestation line and are therefore not recognised in the eyes of the state. The situation has brought huge distress to parents who are already in distress at the trauma of losing a child. The fact that they happened to lose that child at 23 weeks and six days means that, in the eyes of the state, that child never existed and is classed as any other baby loss. In saying that, I in no way diminish the trauma of all baby loss, but there are so many examples of this.

My constituent Hayley Petts first brought this matter to me, and she served on the working group with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. The group has been discussing many aspects of how the law can be changed and has also thrown up a lot of problems about how we go about changing the law. Should we have a universal certificate for all baby loss, for example? Should the scheme be voluntary or mandatory? Should it be subject to medical verification, as is the case under the Australian scheme, and should it be retrospective? There is then the whole thorny issue of how we avoid getting into the minefield that is abortion and other forms of termination. The Bill has done its job before it has become an Act because such work is being done on under the aegis of the Department of Health and Social Care, and I hope we will have some results in due course.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing his Bill to Third Reading. On clause 4, does he agree that when parents lose a child—a healthy full-term baby—as my constituents Jack and Sarah Hawkins did, they should not have to fight to get answers? A coronial inquest might provide them with independent, public, open and honest answers so that they can concentrate on grieving, rather than having to fight to get to the truth of what happened.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the hon. Lady because she pre-empts my clause 4 moment. The fourth, and very important, component of this Bill, which is addressed in clause 4, is coroners’ investigations. She participated in earlier debates and worked very helpfully with me and others to move this important issue up the agenda. I am grateful for her contribution.

Clause 4 will allow part 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 to be amended. That is not easy, and the matter is slightly complicated by the fact that it falls under the jurisdiction of both the Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for coroners, and the Department of Health and Social Care, which is responsible for healthcare in relation to baby loss. I must pay tribute to MOJ officials. I had a very helpful meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who I am glad to see is present on the Front Bench. He was a great champion of many of the Bill’s provisions when he was just a commiserator on the Back Benches and added his name to many of the measures I have been trying to get through today.

The Minister has confirmed that an immense amount of work has gone on at the Ministry of Justice. There are issues still to be resolved, such as whether coroners should have the power to investigate all stillbirths or should concentrate, which I think is practically the better approach, on full-term baby loss, when there are the fewest excuses or reasons for stillbirths to happen. Also, should this be mandatory or effectively subject to parental veto? There are serious problems with that, as there are some cases in which a stillbirth may have been connected to domestic violence and some sort of cover-up may be wanted, so I think we are coming to the view that the scheme should be mandatory. Should there be specialist coroners or should all coroners have the ability to investigate? Of course, there are also capacity constraints. The fact that a lot of work has been going on in the Department in the last few months shows that this can be done.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this important Bill, which is, in effect, enabling legislation in this regard. It is worth reiterating something he has already mentioned, so will he join me in thanking the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar)? It is one thing to have enabling legislation, but given the complex nature of what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is trying to introduce, a Minister who is so supportive is worth their weight in gold?

Tim Loughton: Give my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) a job—I am sure that will happen shortly. We should be paying tribute to him, too, because although many other Members have been part of this crusade, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is sitting next to him, he has probably done more than anyone to put stillbirth absolutely on the parliamentary and national radar.

It is because of the Minister’s empathy, understanding and preparedness to work with parliamentarians that we are in a position in which, if this enabling legislation is enacted, we can have practical measures in fairly short order, perhaps even ahead of the first civil partnership for opposite-sex couples happening in this country before the end of 2019. This enabling clause gives a good deal of discretion to the Minister, and there is no other Minister I have greater faith in to make sure that something actually happens. Now that we have praised him to the rafters, we will expect a very early announcement on when the change will happen.

This is a complicated Bill, as I have said, and that is my own fault, but it contains four really important measures that have widespread support across the whole House and across the country.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: If my hon. Friend wants to ruin my peroration, I will allow him to do so.

Luke Graham: I apologise to my hon. Friend and thank him for giving way. I am in full support of the Bill, but I have one technical question that I hope he will be able to answer. Clause 6 provides that clause 5 applies to Scotland, England and other parts of the United Kingdom. Clause 5(1)(a) states that “the Marriage of British Subjects (Facilities) Acts 1915 and 1916...no longer apply in England and Wales”.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Under clause 6, that will also apply to Scotland. As I am sure the House will know, those Acts make reference to the recognition of marriage certificates in the United Kingdom and those of British dominions, basically giving British citizens getting married in the dominions and those getting married here in the United Kingdom almost equal recognition. I am all for increasing rights, but I just want to make sure that that provision will not reduce any of our constituents’ rights in their future marriage choices.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that very pithy intervention. He makes some good points, and no doubt some other smartarse in the House of Lords will want to bring them up as well. With the greatest respect, I am sure that he can speak further to those points on Third Reading—as long as he does not go on for too long. To coin a phrase from Front Benchers, I would be happy to write to him and give him more details. I shall now somehow try to return to my peroration.

As I was saying before I was so helpfully interrupted, the Bill is long overdue. It sets out a practical route and a timeline—certainly in the case of civil partnerships—for these inequities and inequalities to be resolved. I know that it has widespread support in this House, and I am grateful to all those who have made it possible to get this far. I will be particularly grateful to the Immigration Minister if she ensures that the Bill gets through its Third Reading so that we can have further discussions in the other place. I very much hope that it will be granted its Third Reading without a vote today.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for introducing the Bill and for his excellent campaigning and commitment on all aspects of the Bill. It has been a genuine pleasure to work with him, particularly on the registration of very early stillborn babies, and I thank him for his earlier kind words. Following my speech on Second Reading in February, I was overwhelmed with messages of love and kindness from people up and down the country, and even from as far away as the Netherlands and Italy. I also received messages from families who, like me, had experienced the heartbreak of losing a baby pre-24 weeks and who had been distressed to find that they were unable to register their birth and death because the baby had been born a few days, or perhaps a week or so, before the 24-week gestation threshold. Their messages have inspired me to continue the campaign to change this, and I am pleased to be working on the Department of Health and Social Care’s advisory panel for the pregnancy loss review, which will make recommendations to the Secretary of State.

I also support the clause to give coroners the power to investigate the deaths of full-term stillborn babies. Along with the much-improved additional support that now exists due to the very successful national bereavement care pathways—for which the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss successfully lobbied—it will give solace to parents, at the most devastating time in their lives, to know the cause and circumstances that led to the death of their much-anticipated baby.

Moving on to the other elements in this Bill, I believe that it is way beyond time for a mother’s details to be included in marriage registration. We have an outdated system that prioritises fathers over mothers, and it must be brought into the 21st century. The mother’s details can be found on marriage certificates in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and in civil partnership certification. Believe it or not, I was married 28 years ago—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] I know; it is unbelievable. The sad thing is that, after being brought up single-handedly by my mother after my father abandoned me and my brothers when we were little, it is my father’s name on my marriage certificate, not my mother’s. It is even more sad that, at the time, I did not even think to question that, so endemic was the patriarchy of officiarden to me as a young woman in 1990.

The fact that, almost three decades later, this antiquated patriarchal anomaly is at last to end shows how far we have come, and that women are not, and never were, chattels to be handed over from father to husband. This change will turn the marriage certificate into what it should be: a legal document, not a transfer certificate. It also never occurred to me that the ceremony may also be a little bit outdated. As my father was not present to “give me away”, I asked my uncle to step in—again believing that this had to be done by a man. I would now insist that it had to be done by my mam—I hope she is watching this; I can tell the hon. Member. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham that is who I was texting earlier, but he is not listening—if indeed I felt I needed to be given away by anyone. However, I am happily married, so that is bit of a moot point. I say that in case my husband is listening, so that he will know that I am not planning on doing it again.

That brings me to my final point on the clause to allow opposite-sex couples to enter a civil partnership. I was pleased when the Government announced earlier this month that they intended to do this, and I am pleased that the amendment calling on the Government to do it within the next six months has been added to the Bill. The clauses in the Bill will help to ensure more equality and fairness in all four of the very different areas that we are discussing. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, it is a unique Bill, and I am proud to have worked with and supported him in securing its passage through the House. I wish him and the Bill well and look forward to the day it receives Royal Assent.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I intend to speak very briefly—no cheers, please! This is a great Bill, and it is great that the Government are taking it seriously. I want it to get on as quickly as possible, but I must first convey my thanks to my dear friend the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has spoken so passionately on these subjects. We have had tears and laughter, which is as it should be. If we cannot talk with passion and enthusiasm about birth, marriage and death, what on earth are we here for? Speaking as a serious Government lawyer specialising in inquests and as a bereaved parent, I think it is great that both those skill sets and life experiences have been brought together to enable me to play my small part in forming a law on this subject.
I cannot speak highly enough of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who, with his own unique mix of sarcasm and charm, has managed to persuade the Government to feel competitive about getting the different elements of the Bill into law. He has given us a challenge, and this is now a race. We have to work out whether we can marry or give birth first and then, if the birth goes wrong, whether we can register it. It is right that we take this seriously, because these are desperately serious issues, particularly the registration of stillbirths and when and how we as a society should consider these matters.

11.39 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on his success in getting the Bill through the House. I will focus on the registration of stillbirths because parents and coroners have asked me to support that aspect of the legislation. As the law stands, coroners have no jurisdiction to investigate stillbirths that occur after 36 weeks, which is generally regarded as full term. Coroners can hold an inquest in cases where it is appropriate, particularly when either the family or medical staff are critical of the level of care, but all deaths after 36 weeks should be examined.

As it stands, the system for reporting and investigating deaths is inconsistent, and that matters because the UK has one of the worst stillbirth rates in the developed world, with one stillbirth in every 200 babies born. The grief and sorrow that the parents go through at the loss of the child is unimaginable, and we all recognise that a bereaved parent may not feel that they can face the extra intrusion of a coroner’s inquest. That may not be appropriate and, of course, the decision must still be one for the parents, but an investigation is the only way to understand the circumstances of prenatal deaths so that recommendations can be made to improve future outcomes.

11.41 am

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I rise briefly to add my support to this Bill. It is a fantastic piece of legislation in all respects, and I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has been tenacious in his pursuit of this change for a long time. Like all pieces of good legislation, the question always is, “Why hasn’t this happened before?” It seems so obvious in many respects. The Bill seeks to let opposite-sex couples enter into civil partnerships, permits the registration of the name the mother on a marriage certificate, allows the registration of stillbirths before the 24th week of pregnancy and gives coroners the power to investigate stillborn deaths.

As for the first part, allowing opposite-sex couples to enter into a civil partnership, it is often said, “Why don’t they just get married?” Well, I am a person of faith, and I must say that it can sometimes be quite fragile—it can be difficult to retain that faith in the modern world—but part of being a person of faith is also about recognising and respecting no faith. Many people feel that marriage perhaps has religious connotations that they do not wish to enter into. Marriage is also expensive. It can be a huge undertaking at a time of student debts and other financial difficulties for young people embarking on life together, or for people of any age, to take on what can often be a crippling expense. People may also have different experiences of marriage. They may have seen their parents married or perhaps been married themselves, and they may have seen that marriage did not work for their parents or for themselves. We need to respect that and to understand that the days in which people just jumped into a marriage or in which marriage was the natural progression are now gone for many in our society.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made a powerful point about rights on Report that resonated with me given an event in my own life. His point was about the rights of people who are in a long-term relationship and experience a catastrophe in their lives and then discover, frankly, that their word does not count for what it should. In 1999, my partner at the time was involved in a car accident. She was hit on 9 July, suffering catastrophic head injuries, and she died on 13 July in Whitechapel hospital. This is no indication about the family, who were absolutely fantastic throughout, but she was estranged from her family and we did not actually see each other—our relationship was outside that family framework.

Now, I was not even given any medical updates at first, and it took me a day to get in to see her. Although our relationship may not have been at the stage at which we would have considered a civil partnership if we had had that option, our relationship was legitimate and deserved recognition. I remember that moment when I went to see her, a day after she had been hit, and I was warned that she would have tubes going into her body and all the paraphernalia that comes with a serious head trauma. I was warned that she would look very strange and that I was not to be shocked. Well, as far as I was concerned, she looked as beautiful as ever. I was touched by what the hon. Gentleman said, and it was that that made me rise in support of this Bill more than probably anything else.

The Bill’s second key aim is to review the registration of marriages. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) has pursued the matter relentlessly in her role as Second Church Estates Commissioner, and it is a great privilege to sponsor and support her Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill. There are roughly 2 million single parents in the UK, around 90% of whom are women, so it is curious that, as the law stands, should their children go on to get married they would be permitted to put the details only of the father into the marriage register. My mother brought me up from the age of 10 after my father left home. I still have good relations with him, but she brought me up, working two jobs and all the hours that God sends, yet when I got married in 2014 my mother’s name did not appear on the marriage certificate. That is just ridiculous on every level, and I hope that the Government brings forward secondary legislation to end that anomaly.

I want to reiterate a point made by Baroness Williams on Second Reading in the Lords, when she highlighted how the proposed changes would also enable all marriage entries to be held within a single electronic registry, negating the need for multiple bound marriage registers. That seems like a sensible change, but it is obviously not the sole reason to do it.
The third part of the Bill seeks to assist people who experience a stillbirth after 24 weeks’ gestation. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on their work in raising baby loss awareness.

This legislation is well overdue. It is finely drafted, and it covers off so many things—so many wrongs in our society—that we as parliamentarians need to address. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and urge everyone to support it.

11.47 am

Andy Slaughter: I rise briefly to support the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and to commend all those who have ensured that the Bill has reached this point. On civil partnerships, I want to mention just briefly my constituents Charles Keidan and Rebecca Steinfeld, who fought a four-year battle through the courts, ending with a magnificent victory in the Supreme Court this summer that was absolutely clear, unequivocal and unanimous in telling the Government to get on with making this change.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has pursued these matters to a head, as he always does, without fear or favour, including with his Front-Bench colleagues. I also mention everybody at the Equal Civil Partnerships campaign and all those thousands of couples who are waiting, with bated breath, to be able to cement their relationships. The measure also has the potential to affect millions of couples who do not have rights in this country but often think that they do. I also thank those who have over many years supported same-sex civil partnerships and marriage, including Peter Tatchell and Stonewall, for continuing to support equality.

I hope that the Minister will take back to the Government the message sent by all those voices, and by those on both sides of the Chamber, that we really have waited long enough. Given that the Government did not oppose new clause 1, I hope they will develop a sense of urgency. They have been urged to act by the highest court in the land and by many people. This significant change in public policy will allow millions of co-habiting couples to experience a stillbirth after 24 weeks to register the life of their child is hugely important, as are the new powers for coroners. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) on all the work they have done on that hugely important subject.

I rise today, however, with more mixed emotions than ever before about any proposed legislation, because I do not agree with the extension of civil partnerships to heterosexual couples. To be clear, I support—and supported—equal marriage for gay people. I ran the think-tank Policy Exchange at the time—I was not in this House—and published a paper arguing in favour of it. I thought, and still think, that it was really important for everybody to be treated the same and for everybody to be able to get married, as a further step towards reducing prejudice against gay people in this country.

It is very easy for heterosexual people not to notice the high levels of prejudice that continue to exist in this country, even in this modern era, and not to see that suicide rates for gay people are still higher. I went to school in the 1990s, which was not that long ago, and remember a lad walking up four flights of stairs with kids all around him chanting, “Gay. Gay. Gay.” at him. I do not even know if he was gay, but I am sure he remembers that and will do so for the rest of his life. It is a reminder that prejudice is still out there and still very strong. So, for me, equal marriage was a really important and brilliant reform.

Civil partnerships, however, were, for me, only ever a stepping stone towards creating equal marriage. I thought that, rather than creating two types of marriage, we should have got rid of civil partnerships at the point when marriage was opened up to same-sex couples.

I respect and understand why other Members do not agree with that, and we have heard some of those arguments today. However, I do not accept in particular the argument that we should legislate in this House today because there has been a court case. I think that it is profoundly the business of elected politicians in this House to make such decisions, not unelected judges across the road.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a case as to why civil partnerships should not be equally available; indeed, he is suggesting that civil partnerships should not be available to anyone. However, does not the term “marriage” carry very long-established religious connotations? Some people may not want to sign up to that. Should not the individual have the liberty to make that choice themselves, rather than be prevented by this House from doing so?

Neil O’Brien: I hear my hon. Friend’s argument, but I do not agree with him. During the process of arguing the case for equal marriage, one of the important points made was that it did not affect religious institutions. It did not affect religious marriage; it affected civil marriage. In fact, that is all we have the power to do in this House; we do not and should not control people’s religious practice.
Justine Greening: I appreciate that my hon. Friend is making what is in many respects an intellectual argument, but this Bill is about matters of emotion and matters of the heart as much as anything else. I have not received a single letter or email from constituents asking for civil partnerships to be scrapped, but I have had emails and letters from constituents asking for them to be extended. If this place is basically about taking people’s priorities and making them ours, why would we argue to do something different?

Neil O’Brien: I recognise absolutely that this an incredibly emotional debate, and I want to tread as carefully as I can for that reason, but perhaps I will come on to one of the reasons—all kinds of reasons—why it is not just an intellectual case I am making, but an important pragmatic one.

I really worry about the attempt to create, in effect, two tiers of marriage. Apart from any of the other lovely things about it, marriage is what social scientists call a “commitment device”: it is a way of binding ourselves in for the future. That is one reason why it is a big public occasion and if a couple get married in the Church of England everyone will be asked to shout, “We will” to support them. I am aware that I am playing into my right hon. Friend’s point about sounding too intellectual when calling it a commitment device, but it is lots of other things, too. Why is such a device needed? It is because life is hard, as is staying together. If people are lucky enough to have children, they find that is incredibly tiring and hard, and they are more likely to split up in the years when the children are small. One big problem, and one of the reasons why relationships often break up—we are not trying to create a perfect happy families world in this House; we have no power to do that—like many of the world’s problems, comes down to men. Men, in particular, have a habit of sliding rather than deciding; they want all the benefits of being in a relationship but they do not want to lose the option to bale out. So there needs to be a moment when they fully commit.

About half the children born today will not be living with both parents by the time they are 15, and it is profoundly sad that they would be more likely to have a smartphone than to grow up with a father living at home. I grew up in a very average household, but I consider myself rich because I was lucky enough to grow up with two parents who got on and got on with us. Not everybody in this House has had that benefit. Parents who are married before they have a child are 93%—who stay together until their children reach 15—are married rather than cohabiting. Cohabitating parents account for about 19% of couples with dependent children but for about half of all families with family breakdown.

It worries me that we would do something that creates a status that is sort of halfway between marriage and cohabitation—a sort of marriage-lite. Some of the reasons given for doing this make me nervous. People say marriage is a patriarchal institution, but it is not: I am not oppressing my wife by being married to her. People say it is a religious institution, and actually there is a profound difference between civil marriage and religious marriage—

Luke Graham: Does my hon. Friend’s argument not surely mean that civil partnerships are a step in the right direction, because they allow couples to formalise their cohabitation and make a formal commitment to each other? Does he not agree that we in the Conservative party are champions of individual freedom and we should be providing people with the opportunity to make their choices? This issue is before this House and out for consultation in Scotland. Does he not think this House should lead so that the rest of the UK can follow?

Neil O’Brien: I hear the argument my hon. Friend makes and I say, “Of course”, but the thing I gently point out is that a lot of other Members have made the case for civil partnerships as a final status for people who do not want to get married and said that we should deliberately create a halfway house, not as something that people can be in for a time but for something that they—

Chris Bryant: In a way I am sorry to do this, but as someone who is in a civil partnership, I really want to steer the hon. Gentleman away from this idea of civil partnership as being some kind of halfway house or second-rate version of marriage. It is a settled fact now in British society that we will have this form of relationship available for gay couples. The question is simply whether it is going to be available to others. It feels like a fully endowed relationship to me—not second-rate at all.

Neil O’Brien: I am always grateful to take interventions from the hon. Gentleman, who is so thoughtful on all these issues and has worked on them for a long time. I do not mean in any way to suggest that people do not have committed relationships or that they are in some sense second-class because they are in a civil partnership; all I would say is that I am nervous about some of these arguments. If we had a system where everybody—gay people and straight people—can get married, what would be the argument for creating a new tier of marriage? Imagine a world in which we just had these two things. What would the argument be for that? It would be happy to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, because I think he has something to say—

Chris Bryant: One difference between the two is that people do not have to have a big ceremony. We did, though—we had a great old party. The gays have probably added to the wedding industry quite significantly. Many people, especially if they have been in a relationship for a long time, do not want to feel that by suddenly having a big event they are invalidating the previous 30 years for which they have been together. They just want the legal certainty of making that commitment to another and to have the legal privileges that the state affords them. That is the difference.

Neil O’Brien: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful intervention. It has been brilliant to go to some of the equal marriages that have happened since the change in the law. One learns some wonderful things and hears people’s stories in a way that one would not have done had those marriages not existed. I am glad that they are also powering the marriage industry. I do not, though, buy the argument that people need to spend more to be married than to
have a civil partnership. I think that is a canard. I hear the argument about not wanting to feel like what went before is invalidated, but I just do not think that that is true. Getting married does not invalidate the fact that a couple were together happily before it. I hear all these arguments, but ultimately I am not persuaded by them—

Chris Philp rose—

Neil O’Brien: Here comes another, more powerful one.

Chris Philp: A moment ago, my hon. Friend asked why we need to have civil partnerships when marriage exists and people are perfectly at liberty to choose marriage as an option. The answer is this: marriage has existed for thousands of years and has a profoundly religious connotation for most people, as a social practice dating back millennia. Some people, exercising their own choice, are not happy to enter into an institution that has that religious connotation and therefore want an alternative arrangement. That is why we need civil partnerships as an alternative.

Neil O’Brien: I almost always agree with my hon. Friend about almost all things, but on this issue we find ourselves in disagreement. Marriage in this country predates almost any religion that one can name. I am worried by the argument that is being made in the House today that if someone enters into a marriage—I had a civil marriage; I am an atheist—they are in some way being lured into a religious institution. I just do not think that is the case. I did not notice it. In fact, people who have a civil wedding are not even allowed to play something like Madonna’s “Like a Prayer”, because apparently it is a religious thing. There is a clear distinction in my mind between civil marriage and religious marriage.

I feel that I have made my points. I respect Members from all parties who have made arguments to the contrary, but I feel differently.

12.2 pm

Maggie Throup: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), even though we perhaps do not agree on every point. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on the tremendous work he has done to compile the Bill and steer it through its various stages.

As I said on Second Reading, I see the Bill as very much like a pick and mix, but I do like the “hatch, match and dispatch” description of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. That is a good way to describe the Bill. Its provisions change the way in which marriages and stillbirths are recorded. They are small but important reforms that will make a huge difference to so many. In practical terms, the two events could not be further apart: one is supposed to be the happiest day of a person’s life, yet the other is probably the most tragic day of a person’s life.

I commend those brave colleagues from all parties who have spoken so openly about their own tragic personal experiences of baby loss, in the hope that they can further highlight the value and give others the courage to do the same. Having talked to people throughout the House and in my constituency during Baby Loss Awareness Week a couple of weeks ago, I know that they have made a huge difference. It has been so powerful. Many colleagues have also spoken in this place about the loss of a loved one at a later stage in life. It is never easy to talk openly about such tragic events. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) shared his personal and very moving story in the Chamber just yesterday.

The two elements of the Bill are linked by the acknowledgment that a life existed, for however long or short that time may have been. Because these delicate pieces of paper, birth and marriage certificates, are often treasured by families for generations, they are part of social history and of our story. They often provide comfort to the bereaved when the person recorded on the certificate is no longer there.

On marriage certificates specifically, it is quite astonishing in the centenary year of the Representation of the People Act that this archaic example of inequality has not yet been righted. It is a matter of equality, as well as of family history and social history. Looking at my own family, my parents were married in 1950. Their marriage certificate states that my father’s father was a millworker, but there is no mention of my grandmother. It states that my mother’s father was a stoker on the railway, but there is no mention of my grandmother’s occupation on that side either. Sadly, I have no way of finding out.

Almost 70 years on, we have not moved on at all. To me, that is quite bizarre, which is why I welcome the measures that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has brought forward today and that other right hon. and hon. Friends, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), have worked on in the past.

I support the Bill because every measure will achieve progressive changes that are well overdue, and changes that we can all be proud of.

12.5 pm

Chris Philp: I rise to add my warm congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on the tremendous work he has done to compile the Bill and steer it through its various stages.

I am happy to support all the clauses of the Bill, as it has been amended, not least clause 1, under which, as hon. Members have said, mothers will be recorded on the marriage certificate.

Of course I support the concept of the electronic register that will be set up under the Bill—it is a modern way of recording very important information—but I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed from the Dispatch Box when she sums up the debate that there will still be some form of paper signing in the church or other venue where the marriage takes place. I ask that because my constituent Councillor Tim Pollard has made the good point to me that the traditional ceremony in which the piece of paper is signed is an important part of many people’s experience of marriage. I would
be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the signing ceremony will still be part of the process, even if the information is ultimately recorded electronically, rather than in the old bound books.

Clause 2 is about preparing a report on bringing in civil partnerships for people of all orientations. I strongly support that provision. I respectfully disagree with the comments my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) made in his speech a few moments ago. He criticised the proposal on the grounds that it would create a two-tier system of relationship recognition: civil partnerships and marriage. He referred to civil partnerships as a “halfway house”. I do not accept that they are a halfway house at all; in my view, they are entirely equal to the institution of marriage. I associate myself fully with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). On this issue, I am entirely at one with him—I mean that intellectually, rather than in the biblical sense. I think that people should have the choice. As a Conservative, I believe in personal liberty and personal choice. The individual should be able to choose which of the two institutions they subscribe to.

I do think there is a difference between the two institutions, because marriage carries religious connotations. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough said that the institution of marriage predates religion, but even in times before Christianity and Judaism, the marriage ceremony always had religious overtones. Some people may decide, for their own reasons, that they do not want to associate with that. Indeed, my hon. Friend said that he had in the past been one of them. I therefore think that the choice should be available. Personal liberty and personal choice must sit at the heart of our philosophy in relation to these matters.

Clauses 3 and 4 introduce welcome measures. The report under clause 3 will look into how we might go about implementing the registration proposals. I suggest that parental choice should be the overriding consideration. Different parents will probably feel differently depending on their personal circumstances, and it should be up to the parent to choose whether the registration takes place. Perhaps that could be my early submission to any consultation that takes places on the matter.

Clause 4 is about investigations. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, I think, raised a concern about providing only for parental choice, as there might be some circumstances where the parent—for reasons of domestic violence, for example—might not exercise their choice when properly they should. I wonder whether another way of handling this would be to say that an investigation should take place if either parent or one of the clinicians involved opted to trigger a coroner’s investigation. That is, if any of the interested parties felt that an investigation was appropriate, one would take place. That might guard against my hon. Friend’s concern, while also allowing an element of parental choice.

As parliamentarians, we should focus on trying to reduce—as far as we can—the awful tragedy of stillbirth and neonatal death. Of course, my hon. Friend the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) have campaigned tirelessly on the issue. I draw the attention of the House to the work of Tamba—the Twins and Multiple Births Association—which has run a pilot over the last couple of years, encouraging 30 maternity units to fully adopt National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines in relation to multiple births. As a result, stillbirths in those units declined by 50% and neonatal deaths declined by 30%.

Tamba is campaigning to get these guidelines rolled out across all maternity units. I am a father of twins who were born very prematurely, at 25 weeks and one day. They were very fortunate in that they received excellent care from the NHS and survived, but that is not an experience that all parents have when their children are born as prematurely as 25 weeks and one day. I strongly support Tamba’s campaign and ask the Secretary of State for Health to adopt its recommendations and carry them forward.

12.12 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). This Bill affects an emotive area of public policy that deserves a great deal of attention. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for bringing it before the House, and of course all those who have worked so hard to bring it to this stage.

The momentous decision taken by the Supreme Court in June this year represents a changing point in how we treat civil partnerships. The review that will be conducted following the passage of this Bill will mean a profound change in how our society treats the concept of marriage and partnership. Following the case, the Government stated that they were considering the Supreme Court decision carefully. The Prime Minister has said that, given the sensitive and personal issues involved in the case, no legislative changes would be taken until the consultation on the future of civil partnerships had been completed. I agree with such an approach as it represents an air of pragmatism with which the Prime Minister has worked throughout this issue.

I fully commend the amendments made in Committee regarding the report on civil partnerships. It is crucial that we ensure that this debate is not lost to the revolving cycle of 24-hour news and social media. Committing the Secretary of State to preparing, consulting and presenting a report on civil partnerships will surely avoid this. We must accept that some people in this country have fundamental disagreements with religion and religious convention. Therefore, some will see a review that supports equal access to civil partnerships as a natural step towards a more secular society. Some go even further and believe that marriage represents a time of patriarchy and a social religious structure that fundamentally discriminates against women. I disagree. Although I fully support the equalisation of civil partnerships, I believe that the concept of marriage should still be cherished. For many families, marriage is the foundation on which the home is built, and we should never lose sight of that. We also should not forget the integral role a two-parent household plays in raising children.

Perhaps I should note that I am slightly biased, as Mr Harrison and I have enjoyed 20 years of wonderful marriage. Indeed, they have been the happiest years of his life—[Laughter.]

Chris Bryant: Even if you say so yourself.
Trudy Harrison: And mine. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment.

In relation to the marriage components of the Bill, I find it outrageous that a mother’s name can still not be included on their children’s marriage certificates. That does represent a time at which patriarchy was widespread and sounds akin to the domestic practices of countries where equality is far from adopted. The current practice in no way resembles the liberal, egalitarian democracy in which we live. If we want to stand by all parents in this nation, we cannot claim to be on the side of single parents when 90% of them are women and, as it stands, if any of their children were to get married they would be able to include only their father’s details in the marriage entry.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I support wholeheartedly the contents of the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and it also has a personal significance to me as my daughter announced her own engagement just last week and is due to get married next summer. I very much hope that the Bill will be enacted to enable me, her mother, to sign the marriage certificate of my daughter Ruth and her fiancé Aled.

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend that intervention, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating Ruth on her engagement. We look forward to many more mother of the bride conversations in the Members Tea Room.

I thank my constituents Julie Fisher and Howard Johnstone for writing to me about their civil partnership plans after 30 years of being together. It is crucial that this change is made by primary legislation. Although secondary legislation could be used, it would necessitate the replacement of all of the 84,000 marriage register books that are in use and would be costly and ineffective, whereas if we proceed with this Bill, a new unitary digital database could be created for the marriage register, providing not only a safe and secure model but one that is cost-effective and efficient.

I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for seeking to change the registration procedure for stillbirths. The fact that people go through such a traumatic experience only for the loss of the parents to go unregistered is a long-running travesty. The story of parents such as Sarah Henderson, who lost her daughter at 23 weeks and four days and yet received no certification, exposes the incompatibility of such rigid legislation and such a personal and emotive area. Sarah’s story compelled 370,000 people to sign her petition supporting a change in the law very similar to that being proposed today. That shows the strength of feeling in this country about such a sensitive issue.

Although I commend previous Parliaments for scrutinising this area and making amendments, we must take this step to bring greater humanity to our birth-related legislation. Parliament previously supported a change to the stillbirth definition from “after 28 weeks” to “after 24 weeks” following the then clear consensus from the medical profession about the age in which a foetus should be considered able to survive. The pain and distress that parents might feel when they may not register the birth of a baby born before 24 weeks is unimaginable, but parents might also be distressed at the possibility of having to do so.

This Bill affects three areas of life that are often missed in our intense political climate but have an immeasurable emotional impact on the people of this country. Births, marriages and deaths occur every day, and we must reflect upon and amend legislation affecting them. Finally, I would like to once again commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for his efforts on the Bill and the campaigning he has persisted with on the issues within it.

12.20 pm

Will Quince: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison).

I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for bringing forward the Bill. I congratulate him on getting it to this point with Government support, which is significant. I applaud him for the parliamentary dexterity with which he has incorporated into the Bill so many issues that he has seen as wrongs and injustices over his career in Parliament—I am sure it has a long way to go—since 1997. It is certainly a lesson for us all that we can squeeze a huge number of issues into one private Member’s Bill and still get it through Parliament.

It is a great honour to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, and it is the parts of the Bill relating to baby loss that I would like to focus on briefly in my contribution. The group exists only really for two purposes: to reduce miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death; and to ensure that we have world-class bereavement care and support right across our NHS for those who sadly still go through one of those tragic occurrences. The Bill goes a long way to addressing both those objectives.

First, the element of the Bill on coronial involvement is really quite significant, in particular in relation to stillbirth. We still do not know why around 50% of stillbirths happen, and there is a huge lack of research and evidence. Allowing parents, whether it is voluntary or not—that is still to be decided—and whether it is a late-term stillbirth or slightly earlier, to have coronial involvement is really significant. As part of that evidence-gathering exercise, it is so important that when mistakes are made—the NHS and the medical profession are human businesses, and inevitably mistakes do happen—we learn from every single one. That is why the element on coronial involvement is so significant.

I mentioned this in an intervention, but I would like to pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar). In respect of coronial involvement, the Bill is just a piece of enabling legislation. As soon as a Department accepts that we are going to do something, it can still take months and in some cases years to introduce legislation, but my understanding is that the work that the Minister and his departmental officials have already done means that a measure could come in as soon as within 12 months. That may strike fear into the hearts of officials, but it is quite incredible when we consider the complexity of this issue. Given my point about ensuring that we have the research and evidence base to look at and some understanding of why stillbirths happen, that will enable us to start implementing the measures that we know need to be introduced and start to address it. Working in tandem with the new Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch, which was introduced by
my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), the former Health Secretary, this could have a huge impact, in particular on reducing stillbirth.

The second element, in relation to the registration of pre-24-week baby loss, is part of the bereavement piece and also really significant. I cannot continue my contribution without again paying tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has spoken so movingly about her personal experience of this issue—a hugely brave thing to do—and campaigned tirelessly. She has been key in both forming and working with the all-party group, including as part of her work as a shadow Health Minister.

This is really important because it is so difficult for any parent who suffers a miscarriage or a stillbirth, however it is termed, at 23 weeks and a few days or at 22 weeks to go home with no recognition whatsoever. We have an opportunity to give great comfort. Whether it is still classed technically as a miscarriage or a stillbirth, that baby is still born: the mother has given birth and, in many cases, the father is present. Such a recognition, albeit seemingly quite a small element, is important—that life existed; that individual existed. I know that I do not need to make that point to my friend on the other side of the Chamber.

This Bill has probably achieved such an aim, in that the former Secretary of State has set up the pregnancy loss review, which is being spearheaded by Zoe Clark-Coutes and Samantha Collinge. This work is already being undertaken, and it is recognised at the highest level of the Department of Health and Social Care. I have no doubt that we are going to find a solution, but again it is very complex. There are lots of different views about exactly how we do it, such as whether it is voluntary and at what point in the pregnancy it applies. I have differing views on that, and I will certainly feed them into the review.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): On this very sensitive subject, does my hon. Friend agree that if a baby has to be induced very early due to a foetal abnormality, the parents often experience just as much grief as on the other occasions he mentions, such as natural stillbirth?

Will Quince: Yes is the honest answer, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I have now met many bereaved parents as part of this process, and the reality is that everybody grieves in different ways, and the more ways in which we can provide comfort and support to those bereaved parents the better. She raises a very good point about foetal abnormality—whether there has to be induction, this is classed as a medical termination, or whatever terminology is used. In fact, I find some of the terminology used by medical professionals pretty harsh, and I would love to tone down some of it and use very different language. She is absolutely right in her fundamental point. My personal view, for what it is worth, is that regardless of the point in the pregnancy, if it provides comfort for bereaved parents to have a certificate, a piece of paper or a document that shows that the baby existed, I feel very comfortable about ensuring that such a system is brought in.

I conclude by again thanking my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham because his Bill will make a huge difference. I have focused on two of its aspects, but I also wholeheartedly support the other provisions. It is fantastic that we have full cross-party support for the Bill, and indeed Government support. The sooner the measures incorporated in the Bill can be implemented, the better.

12.28 pm

Caroline Nokes: As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has described the Bill as one about hatches, matches and dispatches, I feel it is incumbent on me to dispatch it swiftly from the Dispatch Box, so I shall not detain Members for long. My hon. Friend has been described today as tenacious. I certainly know that he is very diligent and committed in relation to these issues, and I thank him for his work to raise the profile of them.

We have heard excellent contributions from Members on both sides of the House, particularly the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). She spoke about the work she has done alongside colleagues, but also alongside the Department of Health and Social Care. Many tributes have been paid to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and I delighted to see that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is also now in the Chamber. I know that she has worked very closely with Members on these issues, particularly when it comes to baby loss, and I congratulate her on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) brought a perfect combination of humour and seriousness to what is sometimes a difficult subject for us to talk about, and I congratulate her on that. Many Members raised issues faced by their constituents—the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) mentioned bereaved parents in his constituency, and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about his constituents who were successful at the Supreme Court. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) made an excellent and thoughtful contribution, speaking about a difficult experience in a moving way. He made an interesting point about the distinction between civil partnerships and marriage, and those who may simply not wish to go through a marriage, but for whom a civil partnership would be the right thing.

We had an interesting discussion across the House with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) and I thank him for the points he raised, which clearly provoked strong feelings and interesting conversations. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) wished to know a specific point about marriage certificates and schedules and whether couples who marry in a church would still be able to sign a schedule. I reassure him that they and their witnesses will be able to sign that schedule, which will include all the relevant information such as name, date of birth and occupation, as well as, for the first time, the details of both parents. That is something we all welcome and have wanted to happen for a long time.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). He has spoken previously in the Chamber about his personal experience and the work he is doing.
with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. He always speaks thoughtfully, and Ministers welcome his serious thoughts on this matter.

As we have heard, the Bill will introduce the first reform of how marriages are registered since 1837. It removes the requirement for paper marriage register books to be held in more than 30,000 religious buildings and register offices, moving to an electronic system of marriage registration. I assure my hon. Friends that the Bill will not prevent couples who want to marry in the Church of England or Church in Wales from marrying following ecclesiastical preliminaries, such as the calling of banns and the issue of a common licence. As I said earlier, instead of a schedule, the clergy will issue a marriage document that will be signed at the ceremony by the couple, and returned to the register office for entry into the register. The Government—I know this will put fear into the heart of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—will aim to implement those reforms as soon as possible, subject to the successful passage of the Bill, and will enable changes to be made to include the names of both parents of the couple.

Clause 3 has progressed with strong support from hon. Friends, all of whom agree that the report is both timely and urgent. Work on that report is already under way, and the Department of Health and Social Care is engaging with many key stakeholders, including health practitioners, registrars, charities and academics. The review team has spoken to parents with lived experience of losing a baby before 24 weeks’ gestation to learn about their experience and how best to ensure that the NHS is able to provide the best possible care and support when such a tragedy takes place. The clause requires the Secretary of State to publish a report. Many hon. Friends have already contributed to the report for which the clause provides, and I encourage Members on both sides of the House to support that extremely important work.

On civil partnerships, the Bill certainly sets the Government a challenge, particularly on timing. As I pointed out, there is a great deal of work to be done, including a substantial legislative trawl to ensure that the existing statute book works for opposite-sex civil partnerships. There are policy decisions to be made, and consultations on issues such as the conversion and dissolution of marriages and civil partnerships, as well as the resolution of cross-border issues. Although the Government are firmly committed to equal civil partnerships, for all those reasons, we must ensure that we proceed carefully and thoroughly, as I am certain we will.

The Government are grateful to all those who have taken time to speak to the matters raised by clause 4, and it is important that a broad and diverse range of views is heard and considered carefully. It is clear that when considering whether to enable coroners to investigate stillbirths, we must engage the wider public so that any proposals are thoroughly explored and understood. We think that the review is the right approach, and the Bill is an important step in that direction.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for bringing forward these important issues, and I congratulate him on his tenacity. I look forward to the future passage of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Wednesday I raised with the Prime Minister the police pension shortfall of £165 million. In my area alone, 400 officers could be lost. The Prime Minister responded: “She refers to pensions; this issue has been known about for some years.”—[Official Report, 24 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 276.] Yesterday, the National Police Chiefs Council and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners issued a joint statement saying: “no guidance has been given to what that would mean in terms of costs for employers or a timeline for implementation of those changes.”

It went on to state: “The first notification that has enabled forces to calculate the impact of pension changes came in September 2018.”

I will write to the Prime Minister demanding an urgent meeting with me, the NPCC and the APCC. Can you advise me, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how the Prime Minister can correct the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): In fairness, the hon. Lady has corrected the record by what she has just said, so I think that part has been dealt with. On her point about having a meeting, I know that the Prime Minister meets many hon. Members and I am sure Government Whips will pass on the hon. Lady’s request for a meeting.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order to ask for a Government statement on this matter? According to Chief Constable Dave Thompson:

“It is an extraordinary amount of money policing has been asked to pay with no notice and with no proper consultation. A serious rethink is needed.”

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Chair has not been given notice of any forthcoming statement, but I think the request will have been noticed. It is certainly on the record that that request is pursued and, knowing the hon. Gentleman, I am sure he will do just that.
Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill

Bill, as amended in Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading

12.37 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It has been an immense privilege to be a part of the campaign that has brought the Bill to its Third Reading today. I want to pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), who has provided real leadership throughout the promotion of the Bill. He and I have sat through many meetings and many committees together. It has been his focus and his determination that has led us to this point where we have today an opportunity to do something very worthwhile. I know I speak for the whole House when I wish him a very speedy recovery from his recent operation.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to other hon. Members who have provided outstanding support: my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), as well as the many other hon. Members, too numerous to mention, right across the House who have worked collectively to get us to this point today. I also want to pay tribute to Trinity Mirror. Its contribution to this campaign has been very significant and I am grateful for everything it has done. In particular, I thank Alison Phillips, Andrew Gregory, Michelle Klepper, Paul Millar and Owen Pritchard for their commitment to this important cause.

In the spirit of paying tribute and giving credit where it is due, I am looking very firmly at the Minister, who has responded in the most sensible, co-operative and constructive way. We have sat in a lot of meetings over many months. She has been an absolute pleasure to work with. The leadership that she has shown has been instrumental in ensuring we have the opportunity to pass this very important Bill today. I thank her and her officials for the important job they have done in getting us to where we are. I am also grateful—and a little relieved—that we can rely on the support of both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. I am determined to ensure that we maintain this consensus on Third Reading today and send the Bill safely to the other place.

I want to reflect for a moment on why the Bill is so important. The bottom line is that it will save lives, but it is important to note that of all the people who died in the UK last year, only about 1% died in circumstances that would have made a donation possible, which means that, even though hundreds of thousands of people across the country are registered as potential donors, only a small handful will ever be in a situation that would allow a donation to take place. This is one of the main reasons why today in the UK there are thousands of people waiting for an organ donation and why every year hundreds of people die waiting. This loss of life is devastating, but it is not inevitable. Today we have the most precious of opportunities to save lives and give hope to many. We must not miss that opportunity. Moving to an opt-out system for organ donation, such as the one in Wales, will add thousands of names to the donor register, meaning that once the Bill is passed, hundreds of lives could be saved.

The Bill is not about the state taking control of people’s organs or shaming people into donating. If people want to opt out, that is absolutely fine, and I am entirely respectful of any decision, for whatever reason, to do so. No questions will be asked and there will be no hard feelings. Instead, the Bill is about making it easier for those who might wish to donate to do so. The current system requires people to take the time to discuss this most serious and difficult matter with their loved ones in order to reach a judgment about whether, in the event of some tragedy occurring, they would want their organs to be donated. It is incredibly important that, if people feel able to have that conversation with their loved ones, they do so. Many of us are guilty of not having had them and of putting this important task on hold. I believe that we can no longer afford to ignore this issue, that we must seek to increase the number of people on the donor register and that we must save as many lives as we can, and I believe that the Bill is an important way to do that.

That said, I acknowledge that the Bill is only part of the way to increase the number of people willing and able to donate their organs, so, in concert with the Bill, it is important that we also have an open discussion with our families and in our communities about the importance of making a contribution in this way.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I am very supportive of the Bill. It could be transformative in helping to save lives in our country. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that these conversations should be had in school so that children grow up understanding the role they can play in helping to save people’s lives and so that we encourage young people from an early age to think about becoming organ donors? The power of inertia he is talking about can make a big difference for good.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Lady makes an important point. None of us who is here to support this Bill believe that it is in its own right a silver bullet that will solve the problem we are encountering; it is not, and therefore it needs to sit alongside some very important conversations on difficult issues. Many of us will potentially feel uncomfortable about having these conversations, but the right hon. Lady is correct: it is important that from the earliest possible opportunity we have these conversations with our loved ones so they are absolutely clear about what we would wish.

That point reinforces that, in addition to the Bill, all of us who believe in the value of organ donation should seek to ensure that as many people as possible come forward to register as organ donors. This Bill serves as another important opportunity to raise the profile of that issue and provides a platform for us to be having these conversations with our loved ones. As leaders within communities, we have a responsibility and an important role to play in seeking to encourage people to have those conversations.

Time is short and I do not intend to detain the House for much longer as I am keen to make progress with the Bill, but I do want to take this opportunity to say a final word of thanks to Max Johnson, to Max’s mother Emma and to the whole Johnson family. Many Members...
will recall that Max is the 10-year-old who fronted the Daily Mirror campaign on organ donation. He is an exceptional young man. He was kept alive by a tiny metal pump that was in his chest for seven months. I am absolutely delighted that, after finally receiving a heart transplant, Max is doing well. He has been given a chance to live a relatively normal life because of a donation made by a donor, Kiera Ball. I believe that Keira Ball and her family should serve as an inspiration to us all, and I would like to take this opportunity to make a request—I am sure the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) will be happy to do this—that our collective thanks are passed on to the family of Keira Ball for their bravery and dignity and the example they have set. It has been an inspiration to us all, and I want to personally extend my thanks to the hon. Gentleman for the dignified way in which he has represented his constituents over a number of debates in this House.

Quite simply, we are here today to save lives—to save the lives of people like Max, but also of thousands of other people who would benefit from the change this Bill sets out. We have a rare opportunity at our fingertips to make this powerful and meaningful change. I hope very much that we do not miss the opportunity to save lives and that this Bill goes forward; I hope hon. Members very much that we do not miss the opportunity to save the lives of people like Max, but also of thousands of constituents over a number of debates in this House. We have a rare opportunity at our fingertips to make this powerful and meaningful change. I hope very much that we do not miss the opportunity to save lives and that this Bill goes forward; I hope hon. Members

12.48 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I begin, as I suspect many will, by paying tribute not only to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), but of course to all those he mentioned who have played such an incredibly important role in bringing this Bill so close to, and I hope by the end of the day on to, the statute book. This is a piece of legislation whose time has come, because we live in a society that is less religious than ever before and we are ever more aware of what good medical science can do. It is of course vital that we respect the wishes of those who do not want their organs to be donated, but it is also vital that we have a conversation about the good that organ donation can do. I particularly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s central point that this is not a panacea or a silver bullet. It is a surprisingly small part of the conversation that we need to have, now more than ever, about what organ donation can mean for the people who need those organs so much.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said, it is right that we are beginning to have this conversation in schools, and it needs to be surprisingly detailed. Many people whose consent will now be presumed will not realise that their presumed consent applies not only to internal organs but to corneas, for example, and to other parts of the body. Some people will find that genuinely invasive, even though the donation of those parts would do a huge amount of good. This is one of the many reasons why this Bill’s time has come.

People who wish to opt out must have a conversation with their doctor and with their family, so that when the time comes, the information that they have opted out is known, understood and easily accessible. I was hugely envious of the progress that has been made on this in Wales. It is inevitable that the family of someone who went on to give their organs and make a huge a difference would be profoundly unhappy if it later came to light that the person had expressed a wish, which had not been discovered, that their organs should not be donated. This is an immensely complex area, and the Bill provides as many opportunities as possible to opt out in a sensible and informed way. We also need to ensure that, if those opportunities are taken, they are known about and understood, because time is often of the essence when it comes to taking organs and ensuring that they do all the good that they can.

There will be a huge burden on the Human Tissue Authority to ensure that this works as well as it possibly can, because it will be the regulator for this scheme. This is a challenge that we have not faced before, and I know that the HTA is confident of the good that it can do, but we should be careful not to put doctors in the difficult position of being asked to take advantage of the legislation. There will now, I hope, be deemed consent, but it will ultimately be down to the doctors to make the call on whether to proceed.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one way to ensure that there are not misunderstandings is for everyone who is concerned about organ donation to discuss it with their nearest and dearest so that they all know that the person is happy to have their organs donated?

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. This is all part of the broader conversation that we need to have. None of us wants to be in this position. We would all like everyone to have signed up to the organ donation register because they had already had that conversation. Given that we are where we are, however, the more people who have those conversations, the better.

There will be an increased burden on doctors as a result of this provision, not in workload but in decision making. If they have not been able to locate evidence of an opt-out, they will still have to be sufficiently content that they may take those organs that will be so important to others. We should be careful that the presumption of consent is not interpreted as a compulsion on a doctor to take organs. Of course doctors will not behave rashly; we know that they will be considered, cautious and sensible, not only because of the regulatory regime but because they would never seek to upset either the deceased or their family and friends in this situation.

I should like to conclude where I began, by saying that these are immensely complex matters and that this is not a panacea. It should be the beginning of a conversation to make more and more people aware of the huge good they can do, whether by donating corneas or kidneys. Such donations can now make a profound difference to multiple people, and even in moments of extreme sadness, families and friends can do a small amount of good. This Bill enables not only those individual operations, but hopefully a far broader conversation that will allow us to say that great good can be done and that presuming consent is the right balance and that, in the context of that broader conversation, we can ensure that people do opt out where necessary.

I commend this Bill and commend the bravery that some have shown in getting it through the House, because there is sensible and legitimate opposition to
some aspects of it. I hope that the Bill will mark a serious bit of progress and will make the difference that everyone here hopes will be made to so many lives. In collaboration with the regulators and the medical profession, I hope that we can strike the right balance to get the maximum benefit and do not inadvertently cause pain and distress to people who are placed in a position that they would never wish to be in.

12.56 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on introducing the Bill and on the constant campaigning that has led to the Bill reaching its final stages. As we heard from my hon. Friend, the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West is unable to be with us today, so I wish him well and I am sure that the whole House will want to wish him a good recovery. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central for so ably standing in for today’s final stages and for his many years of campaigning, and I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for his thoughtful contribution.

Many hon. Members have brought this issue to the House over the years, and I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and, again, to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central. I also commend the Daily Mirror on its sterling work, its awareness-raising campaigns and especially for supporting the case of Max Johnson, then a nine-year-old boy badly in need of a new heart. Thankfully, Max got a new heart due to the bravery of the family of Keira Ball, his donor, and it was great to hear from my hon. Friend that Max is doing so well.

There is no doubt that we need more organ donors in England. As of 19 October 2018, a total of 6,198 people were registered on the active waiting list for a transplant, with 285 of them needing a new heart. That is why I am proud to support this Bill, which will hopefully help to deliver an increase in the organs available for donation and shift social norms towards donation.

The gap between the number of organ donors and patients requiring organ transplantation is higher in black and minority ethnic communities than in the general population. Earlier this year, I sat on a panel with my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith)—I am pleased she is here today—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) to review BAME blood, stem cell and organ donation and to hear real-life stories of why more organ donors are needed for these communities.

It is important to recognise that the campaign to increase organ donors will not end with this Bill. We need a comprehensive communications strategy that can reach everyone, but especially those who may not already be convinced by the call to be an organ donor. Will the Minister commit to working with Public Health England to establish a national media campaign to raise awareness and enable people to make an informed decision on organ donation? Any media campaign should be followed up regularly, to ensure that the message is spread far and wide. We will also require investment in health structures, including the workforce, to maximise the potential of a soft opt-out system. Will the Minister consider increasing the number of organ donation specialist nurses, so that families can be supported in their decision?

In closing, this Bill is so very important, but what happens next is crucial. Just one donor can save up to nine people and give them a future with their loved ones. That is why we need any future system to be supported by a national media campaign and increased resources for our healthcare structures, so that everyone has the information they need to make an informed and important choice.

1 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is always an immense honour to follow the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). I associate myself with everything she said.

I have been asked to speak on behalf of one of our colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who cannot be here, is Max’s MP and she has asked me to say that Max has been inspirational to everybody, both locally and nationally, in fighting for change and that his work has been remarkable. As a nation, we need to understand how important the gift of organ donation is to others. Max has demonstrated how valuable that gift is.

Eddisbury is in an area of the country that was affected by the Alder Hey scandal, and my hon. Friend says that we must not fail to take into account the lessons of the past and that those affected by Alder Hey need reassurance that appropriate safeguards are in place. The wishes of the family must always be paramount. Without safeguards, the work of the Bill risks being undermined by people opting out. My hon. Friend is keen that we work together to ensure that the positive benefits of donation are made clear so that lives may be saved.

I am happy to act as a mouthpiece for my hon. Friend, because I, too, approach this Bill with the scars of my involvement in previous inquests. I was partially involved in the Marchioness inquiry. Horrific acts were involved in the Marchioness inquiry. Horrific acts were carried out on the bodies of those who had died. I have always been interested—including, sadly, through my own experience, which we have already talked about this morning—in how we treat the bodies of those who have recently died. It is something that we really do not like talking about in our clean, hygienic society. Many people have never had personal experience of the bodies of the dead, and it comes as a tremendous shock when we do, often in the most dreadful circumstances because it is the person closest to us who we see lying dead.

I, too, approach this Bill with caution, but I pay enormous tribute to another friend on the Labour Benches, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for steering the Bill through so sensitively. Those who, like him, have served bravely with the armed forces—or, as in my case, have helped support the armed forces from a safe place in London—have to have these conversations, and we have them when we are very young. It is important that the whole of society can learn from that. They are difficult conversations but
they are not impossible. It is important that we get with it and say these things, however difficult it may be to do so.

The medical teams dealing with the recently bereaved family or the dying individual are themselves often traumatised by the experience and may not be the best people to have such sensitive conversations. Whatever else we learn from all the sharing we have done during this morning’s debates, training is key and we must be very careful about the training and support we put in place for hospital staff to be able to have those really difficult conversations.

I will close by speaking on behalf of another colleague who, though present, is not allowed to speak, namely my hon. Friend, the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). She has asked me to mention her constituent Liam Byrne, who is a campaigner. I should say in this context that he has also been a political opponent of my hon. Friend, but she speaks with great passion and vigour about him, and feels very proud of the campaigning he has done. He has received two life-saving liver transplants, and he strongly believes that we need to get on with this Bill and change the law before Christmas. He would like me, as I am the mouthpiece, and my hon. Friend to make it clear that time is not an option for people who need these organs.

1.5 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a pleasure to be called to speak in a debate with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and it has been a particular delight to listen to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is moving the Bill’s Third Reading on behalf of the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), with whom I share two things. Clearly, we do not share a political party, but we support both Coventry City football club and his excellent Bill, which he has diligently pursued through the House. It is a compliment to his skills that he has managed to secure such wide-ranging support across the House, and in a very sensitive area. I know that for Government Members this would be a free vote issue and I believe the same would apply to Opposition Members, given the issues it touches on. The fact that he has skilfully managed to assemble such a broad ranging coalition of support is a tribute to him, as is the work that has been done to assure the genuine concerns some people have about this.

I am quite a religious person, and Members will know from some of my previous speeches the role I play in my local church. This Bill does not raise any issues for me, but I respect the fact that it does for some groups out there. I suspect that many Members will not have seen the reassuring email that has come into my inbox while we have been in the House today from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, forwarding a letter from the Minister setting out a number of reassurances and making it clear that the Board of Deputies is reassured by what has been said and does not see a reason for any objections on the grounds of its faith.

We are calling the Bill the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, but we could just as easily call it the “Birthday someone is going to be around for Bill”, the “Job that will be kept Bill”, the “School that will be started Bill”, the “Grandchildren who will be seen Bill” or “The father or mother who will get to see their son or daughter graduate Bill”, because that is ultimately what this is about. In this debate, it is natural that we can sound as though we are just talking about anatomy, and I will probably sound as though I am doing that in a minute. It can sound as though we are talking about bits in our bodies being transplanted into someone else, and we can go through the list of things. The reality is that the benefit of transplants and making more organs available is that this gives people back their life or saves their life. We are talking about the person who no longer has to go for dialysis and is able to do other things with their life. We can keep such people alive but once they have been able to have their transplant, they are able to move on. So this Bill is very welcome.

I am clear that this Bill would not force anyone to have their organs transplanted against their stated will—that will not happen. Even if someone did not know about these provisions, protections have been well crafted by the hon. Member for Coventry North West, working together with the Government, that provide reassurance to anyone and any family who might have a concern that that would take place. It was a delight to serve in Committee where this was explored in some detail. It was made clear that people could provide evidence on what the person’s views would have been; clear evidence could be provided showing that they were part of a particular religious group or movement that has an objection, or showing that they had raised their objection. For me, this is therefore very clear.

It is also clear that this Bill is not about taking organs from those who would lack the capacity to make that choice for themselves; clear protections are in place that would be available in respect of those who would not genuinely understand the provisions and what this Bill would mean. So for me, the Bill is welcome.

Just before I was elected, there was a well-known campaign in Torbay called the Green Star Man campaign. A chap dressed up like a superhero and went around hanging stars around the bay, and he tried to get people talking about what it was all about. He did not tell anyone until the great reveal. He had hung them off a palm tree and the town hall, and I think my predecessor, Mr Sanders, brought one up to Parliament and sat out on the Terrace with it to make it look like it had been hung here. I give him credit for supporting that campaign. It was all there for the big reveal, which was that the stars were the people who became organ donors. This chap was motivated by the experience of his daughter, who had needed a transplant, and by the fact that someone could give the gift of life when they could no longer give any other gift or make any other gesture like it. It is such a special and unique gift.

One key thing that drives my support for the Bill is that currently the conversation about organ donation comes up at what will be the darkest time in a lot of people’s lives. It will normally be in the case of a surprise or sudden death. Let us be candid; that is particularly true for those most likely to be candidates for organ donation—people in their 20s, 30s and 40s—who may have had no comprehension that something was going to happen to them. This sort of discussion will bring up some difficult memories, even for some Members present. To be set down at that moment to have a
convers ation about organ donation is one of the most difficult things for anyone to do. The doctors need to do it at that time, but the Bill will rightly change the perception, and it will be done only if there is an objection. That will make the conversation at that moment easier.

I was lucky. I can remember when I was 13 and my grandfather had just died. My grandparents were getting older and my father sat me down—I did not think anything of the conversation at the time—and told me his views on organ donation and that if ever I was asked, I should say yes. My mother did the same shortly afterwards. Years later, they revealed why they had done that: their parents were getting older—my mother had lost both her parents by that point and my father’s parents were just about to turn 80—and they realised who it was who was likely to have to have that conversation if something happened to them. It would no longer be their parents, and it would probably be me. They felt that if I, as a 16, 17 or 18-year-old, was suddenly presented with that choice, it would be immeasurably harder for me to make if I did not know what they thought. Knowing what they thought would make it much, much easier. They also shared one or two other thoughts about medical treatment in extreme situations.

I benefitted from that conversation, but not many people find it an easy conversation to have, particularly if we think of someone talking to potentially teenage children about the fact that they may be presented with a situation in which their parents are in a desperate state medically and, if the parents’ views are not fully known, it might come to them, at 18, to make the choice about what happens. The Bill will make that process much easier and much simpler. That is very welcome and will have a genuine benefit in expanding the number of organs available for donation.

The provisions of the Bill cover off any technical concerns that any Member may have. Indeed, this is already the law in Wales. It has not caused particular problems in Wales and we do not see many people there raising huge objections to it. We have not seen huge demonstrations since it came into law there. I have absolutely no reason to believe that the implementation of these provisions in Torbay will be any more difficult than the implementation of the change was in Torfaen. The practical effect on the ground is there to see. Members who represent Welsh constituencies have certainly not come into the Chamber to argue that the change was any more difficult for anyone to do.

For me, this is a welcome and timely Bill. It is also one of the few occasions when, as a Conservative MP, I will stand up in the House of Commons and praise the Daily Mirror. It is not usually my favourite newspaper—I have been in it a couple of times and it has not normally been positive—but it deserves credit for this campaign because many ordinary working people across the country, the very people the Mirror likes to give a voice to, will benefit.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an impassioned, fantastic speech. I do not know if he is aware that I have had a transplant. It came from a friend, a live donor, rather than from a deceased person. A transplant is hugely important to people who are on dialysis due to kidney failure, like I was, because of the pain they go through, or that their families go through and the huge amount of care it takes, quite apart from the cost that is incurred by the national health service. That is why this measure is important and why it is working in Wales. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Does he recognise that the old system required the consent of the next of kin, which is the difference that we are talking about today?

Kevin Foster: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. For many people, it will be inspiring to see a Member of Parliament who has benefited from a transplant playing a full part in our parliamentary proceedings, passionately representing his constituents and passionately serving his community in Birmingham. That is what this is about. I could have added to the start of my speech that this is the “Carrying on as an MP Bill”. Such examples are so important.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the issue is the consent of the next of kin. Although I can understand why that was the original process, I have always taken the view that if someone has expressed unconditionally that they wish to be an organ donor, that should be final. I have expressed that wish and it will now be on the record in Hansard. I hope nothing does happen, but I have said that even if my wife was presented with the choice, my view would be the final view.

The hon. Gentleman is right that people are not asked for their consent at a nice time when they can go home, have a think about it and then come back and have a cup of tea when everything is going great. It probably happens after they have received a phone call to tell them that their loved one is very unwell. They then get to the hospital and are sat down, and clearly the conversation is a very difficult one. It is then that the next of kin is asked to make the choice. For some people, it provides a bit of comfort at that moment that at least something good has come of the situation. Many people take at least some satisfaction in the fact that, despite what has happened to their loved one, they can still do something positive. However, for most people, it is not the easiest time to make that decision. The Bill will turn that around and make it easier.

Hopefully in future debates on this issue, more Members will be able to do what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) has done and demonstrate exactly how transplants change lives, whether from living donors as in the case of his kidney transplant or from someone who has made the most special gift that they can make once they can give no more. It literally means people carrying on with their jobs, carrying on with their lives and still being there for their loved ones and their families, just as the hon. Gentleman is doing today in this House. Again, I thank him very much for his intervention.

A member of my office has recently had a transplant. I will not go into the details, because I am conscious that they are a member of staff. They are now in the process of coming back to work. We have certainly seen a great difference in them. They are looking a lot better, a lot fresher and a lot keener. Their view is that they have got their life back. Our thanks go to the family who made that difficult choice. There were occasions
when the staff member concerned had to go up, only to find that an organ was not suitable. Finally, I think on the third occasion, the organ was suitable for transplant.

I have seen lives turned around and changed, and we will see more of that because of the Bill. It is genuinely a Bill that will save some of our constituents’ lives. Over the next few years, I doubt there will be a single constituency in the country that does not see at least one person have their life turned around by the provisions of this Bill.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West has been in the House for an incredibly long time, during which he has been in the Government and held numerous positions. Whenever he finally decides to retire, I suspect that he will rightly take the most pride in this Bill. I can genuinely say that it will be viewed as one of his legacies, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) is pleased that he has been able to play a role in bringing it to the House today.

I am conscious that I have now been going on for about 15 minutes, and I do not plan on trying to break one of my Friday records—not least given how much I support the Bill. I am pleased to have seen the general support in the House and to have had the chance to say a few words in support of the Bill. I very much look forward seeing it pass its Third Reading in the very near future.

1.20 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my good and hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who made a typically thoughtful, telling and long contribution.

The question of organ donation, as with so many debates about what the Government can tell us to do with our bodies, can be contentious. There are deeply held beliefs on both sides of the debate. A move towards a system of presumed consent is exceptionally worthwhile, but the right to opt out must be clearly and consistently protected at every stage.

There are three factors to consider: first, is there a clear need for the Government to pursue an increase in donations; secondly, does the available evidence suggest that an opt-out donation policy will lead to such an increase; and, thirdly, is such a policy compatible with the private right of the individual citizen to ultimate ownership of their own body?

On the first question, I believe that the only answer is a resounding yes. Every year, hundreds of people die waiting for a transplant and many thousands more languish on waiting lists that create a bottleneck for life-changing—indeed often life-saving—surgery. Even worse is something that I see in my own constituency and have raised with the new Birmingham and Solihull clinical commissioning group: black and minority ethnic patients, who are more likely to suffer diseases that require transplants, such as kidney diseases, face an ever more acute shortage due to lower take-up of voluntary donation among their communities. Such insufficiencies and inequalities demand that we address them in whatever way we can.

It was a great pleasure to see my good friend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) in the Chamber and to hear his intervention. I know the circumstances of the individual donation, and the story is even more remarkable than we have heard in the Chamber today. The hon. Gentleman’s vibrancy, which we see day in, day out, is a testament not only to him, but to the medical staff who helped him through the operation.

Of course, there has been a consistent trend of more people opting in under our current regime. Indeed, there are more than 25 million people on the NHS organ donor register, and we thank every single one of them, but it is an unfortunate fact that only a fraction of people die in circumstances that make their organs suitable for transplant—just 1% percent of that 25 million, according to NHS figures. Would a shift to presumed consent address that problem? The available evidence is promising, although not wholly conclusive, but I am willing to go with an act of faith.

Several countries that have moved to an opt-out donation model have seen a rise in donations, including—this is most pertinent to us—Wales, which introduced an opt-out system only recently and has seen increases in both deceased donors and transplants. Countries such as Spain have coupled the approach with other measures, such as heightened public awareness campaigns and an overhaul of the infrastructure underpinning the donation system. That obviously muddies the waters, as does the fact that any uptick in donations often occurs years after the switch to the new system. In some countries, such as Brazil, donation levels have actually fallen slightly after the change to the new system. However, I feel that there is enough positive evidence to suggest that a switch to an opt-in system for England would be very worthwhile, provided that the rights of individuals to refuse consent are adequately safeguarded.

It is important that the deceased’s family has a role to play. For example, if they are aware of an expressed opposition to donation that was not formally registered with the NHS, I believe that they should have the right to register it. Over the longer term, the right to opt out must be reinforced by robust protections to ensure that doing so remains a simple and easy thing to do, with no questions asked. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) was very particular about that, which I was grateful to hear.

Individuals who refuse consent should not be subject to any pressure to change their minds or asked at intervals to think again. We must never lose sight of the fact that our bodies are ours, however valuable and useful they might be to others, and that they are not the property of the state in any way.

In summary, I support the Bill. I have considered the evidence, and while it is contradictory in part, we should look at the examples from Wales and Spain. The system should be made up with the correct procedures, encouragement and public information, and an understanding that it is our body. I believe wholeheartedly that this Bill should be passed and that there should be a fundamental change in this area.

1.25 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to support this important Bill. I grew up in Huddersfield, and Barnsley are our great rivals, but despite that it is a pleasure to congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on this hugely important Bill. As
my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, it protects important rights. He made the incredibly important point that our bodies are not for the state. They belong to us, and it is up to us, that we have the right to say no if we have objections, but I believe that the Bill includes safeguards to achieve that.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned the case of Max Johnson, just nine years old, whose life was saved by a heart donation from Keira Ball, who had been tragically killed. I wonder whether I might also mention the Leicestershire case of Albert Tansey, whose life was saved by a heart transplant at the amazing Glenfield Hospital when he was just four years old. The hospital is home to the now saved children’s heart unit, which we have all strongly supported in Leicestershire. Thanks to the miraculous work done at Glenfield, he is now enjoying his ninth birthday, and his family are strongly in favour of the Bill. It has already been said that this could be called the “Getting on with your life Bill”, or the “Being a Member of Parliament Bill”, but it is also the “Enjoying your ninth birthday Bill”.

Although this debate could be rather bleak, there is some good news: 50,000 people are alive today thanks to organ transplants, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who is looking very well on it, I must say. The number of people registered as donors is rising—we thank them for that—and the numbers on the transplant waiting list have fallen steadily over the past eight years. However, the Bill is still necessary because some people are missing out. Between 2005 and 2010, some 49,000 people had to wait for an organ transplant, and 6,000 died while waiting, of whom 270 were children. We could save more lives if we had more donations. I am particularly conscious that for some groups, particularly ethnic minorities, it can be particularly difficult to find a transplant. I have seen the good work done by the NHS and visited a temple just north of my constituency to see the outreach work it is doing to try to find more donations, but none the less there is still a big problem.

In 2008, only one of the top eight countries with the greatest number of organ donors per capita had an opt-in system. All the others had opt-out systems, so there is strong evidence that such systems can increase the number of donations. In 2017, we know that 1,100 families refused to allow an organ donation because they were not sure whether their relatives would have wanted to donate. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made the important point that asking people to make a proactive decision to donate at an incredibly emotional and difficult moment is harsh and unfair. I think that many families would later come to value the fact that a loved one’s organs had gone on to help someone else to live.

Julian Knight: Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes in that situation, relatives could make a decision that they later regret, because in the emotion of the moment, they might not make the decision to say, “Let’s go ahead and make the donation.”?


Let us also think about the medical staff who need to have these incredibly difficult conversations. A long time ago, I was a medical student. I remember the first time I ever saw someone who had died and the medical staff’s incredibly difficult conversations with his family in the hospital. Imagine then having to ask the family to make the donation of an organ to save another life. It is almost an unbelievable thing to have to ask people to do.

We know that, since the introduction of the opt-out system in Wales, the number of deceased donors is up from 60 to 74. Those are small numbers, but none the less that is a rise of 23%. It is early days, but the opt-out system does seem to help. Obviously, we need the safeguards that my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull described, but at the end of the day, the Bill will save lives—it is as simple as that.

It is ironic that often on a Friday, when there are relatively few of us here, we talk about matters of life and death. This is one of them. This Bill will save lives. It means more careers, more lives and more ninth birthdays. If I can have a moment of poetry, it is what one poet called the “million-petalled flower of being here”.

This Bill will save people’s lives, and it is a pleasure to support it.

1.31 pm Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): The reason that I take a particular interest in this Bill has already been alluded to by many Members on both sides of the House, but I make no apology for rising once again to refer to the story involving my constituent.

Before doing so, may I join others across the House in wishing the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) all the best in his recovery? In many ways, we would not be this far in the process were it not for him, and I pay tribute to the way he has led the Bill through the House. It has been my pleasure to speak at each stage of the Bill’s passage and to serve on the Bill Committee. I also thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his kind words, which I will pass on to my constituents.

It is to them that I turn now and the story that has been alluded to but is worth retelling. If there is anything about this Bill that we need to keep in mind, it is that it is about people—it is about individuals, it is about saving lives and it is about the double-edged sword of a life being saved, but for that to happen, a life has to tragically be cut short. It is one such life that I wish to retell the story of.

On a Sunday morning last year on 30 July, there was a road traffic collision on the A361, otherwise known as the north Devon link road. It happened only about five minutes from my constituency home. Tragically, we had four fatalities on that short stretch of road in the space of a week. To go off slightly left-field, I am delighted to say that since then, because of persistent campaigning by many people, the Government have granted £83 million for major improvements on the road, mainly because of the safety concerns and the poor accident rate on that particular stretch.

Last summer, an accident took place involving two vehicles. Occupants of both were seriously injured. Before going any further, it is worth recognising that those who survived this accident are still living with its aftermath, and my thoughts remain with them nearly 18 months on. One of the cars involved in the accident was carrying members of the Ball family from Barnstaple.
There was Keira Ball, her younger brother Brad and their mum Loanna. The paramedics, the emergency services and the NHS staff at the four different hospitals that the victims of this accident were taken to all did their best work, but sadly, young Keira Ball passed away two days later on the Tuesday afternoon. She was just nine years old.

Keira’s mother and brother were very seriously injured in the accident, and they were in hospital. They were not able to make decisions at this time, so the agonising decision came down solely to Keira’s father, Joe. He took the decision—and what a brave and courageous decision it was in these circumstances—that, in the midst of this tragedy, he wanted the life that had just been so cruelly taken away from his young daughter Keira to be given to somebody else, so he took the decision that Keira’s organs should be donated.

Following that brave decision, four people are alive today who otherwise almost certainly would not be. This is the power and the strength of organ donation, and this is why it is incredibly important that we get this Bill on to the statute book today: it is about these people. Keira donated her kidneys, her heart, her liver and her pancreas. One of her kidneys was given to a man in his 30s who had been on the waiting list for a transplant for two and a half years. The other kidney was given to a woman in her 50s, and she had been on the waiting list for nine and a half years. A young boy received Keira’s pancreas and liver.

Then we come on to Keira’s heart. It was given to a very brave and very sick 10-year-old boy, who has since very much become the figurehead of this campaign. I refer of course to Max Johnson. Max has been mentioned, quite rightly, so many times in this House and so many times during the passage of this Bill through Parliament. The media are calling it, quite rightly, Max’s law. I have a slight preference for it to be Max’s and Keira’s law, but it is actually the law for everyone who has found themselves in this situation—every parent, every relative or loved one, who has had to make the sort of agonising decision that Keira’s father made on that day—and for everyone who has benefited from the donation of an organ from a deceased person, as Max Johnson did.

It is Keira’s story; it is Max’s story; and it is a story of how a very brave and, I am sure, a very difficult decision to allow Keira’s organs to be donated has given life to other people who would otherwise almost certainly not be here today. Surely, of all of the arguments for supporting this Bill and for securing its swift passage on to the statute book, that is the strongest one—that this Bill is about saving lives. It is about giving people the gift of life just at the point when it might be taken away from them, and just at the point when it has been cruelly taken away from somebody else.

More organs are going to be available for donation as a result of this Bill, and that is crucial. We have heard some of the statistics from other Members, so I will not rehearse all of them, but I want to mention a couple of figures that I think are important. According to the latest NHS statistics, only 1/3 of people who die each year do so in what the NHS describes as “suitable circumstances” to allow their organs to be donated. I think we can probably guess, without going into too much detail, what lies behind that careful use of language. It means that only a very tiny proportion of people who die each year are not only suitable to have their organs donated, but have signed up voluntarily to the organ donation register.

If we cast our minds back to O-level or GCSE maths—depending on our ages—and the world of Venn diagrams, we can see that we need to have a lot of people in the middle bit where the circles intersect to ensure that enough organs will be donated to save lives. Because of the current way in which the law operates, that bit in the middle is not big enough: it does not have enough people in it. Bluntly, we do not currently have a system that allows for enough organs to be available to save enough lives. This Bill changes that, and that is why it is welcome.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is talking about the circles in a Venn diagram. I just make the point that many people would actually like to give their organs so that other people could live, but their relatives simply do not know that at present. This Bill is one way of solving that terrible problem.

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes a perfect point. That is indeed the case, and another reason why the Bill is incredibly important.

Mr Khalid Mahmood: I commend the bravery of Keira’s father in making that decision at the very difficult point of the end of her life. Importantly, the Bill will allow families to discuss this issue before things get to that stage and, as has been said, a difficult decision made at a difficult time could become somewhat easier to confront, and other lives could be saved.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is correct. As someone said earlier, we do not like talking about this stuff, although we should be talking about it more. If the Bill provides us with such an opportunity, that is another reason why it needs to be welcomed.

Although three people a day die from a lack of suitable organs, the situation is worse among people from the BAME community who are more likely to suffer from illnesses that require an organ transplant. The National BAME Transplant Alliance has highlighted that issue, and said in its submission that consent to organ donation must be increased among ethnic minority communities, because transplants are more likely to be successful when the donated organ is a closer match to the recipient. Sadly, however, within that community there is a lack of organs available for donation. That has to do with many issues, including a lack of willingness—perhaps for cultural reasons—to discuss the issue within the family, or perhaps a lack of access to knowledge about the way that the organ donation system works. There are a number of issues, but it is simply iniquitous that the BAME community should suffer more, for whatever reason, and that is why the Bill is so welcome and necessary.

Mr Khalid Mahmood: That is a key part of this Bill because it will allow BAME communities to discuss this issue. I know that there are barriers in terms of some religious thought on this matter, and we are working with the kidney transplantation unit at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham to try to make people aware of...
this issue during Ramadan and other periods. More such campaigns would enable us to get the message across to people that organ donation saves lives, and in terms of religious campaign, we have a letter from the Board of Deputies to recognise that. We need more support from within the Muslim community to say that this is permissible.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is an extremely interesting point, and just the hon. Gentleman raising the issue in such a way will help to raise awareness. We are doing part of the job merely by discussing it in this way.

I have fully supported the Bill through all its stages, and it is significant that it sailed through Committee in record time—I think we were there for about 35 minutes. There were no amendments, which is a legacy of how well it was drafted in the first place and a tribute to the fact that the Bill enjoys cross-party support. However, one issue raised in Committee is worth mentioning again, although I am sure the Minister will address it in her remarks. To understand it, we need to look to Spain, where a similar Bill to the one under discussion has been in force for some little while. In Spain, it appears that the legislation has significantly increased the number of organs available for donation and saved lives, but—and this is an important but—the Bill introduced not only a change to the legislation, but additional Government investment to ensure that people could access an education and information campaign. We understand that the law had been changed. The campaign encouraged people to hold conversations with their families and to ensure that there was no misunderstanding, and that the Government or the state were not saying “We’re taking your kidneys and liver from you whether you like it or not.” It was extraordinarily important that the public information campaign went hand-in-hand with the change in legislation.

In Committee, the Minister said that the Government would commit £30 million over three years for a public information campaign, with an additional £2 million for one-off spending at the start when there will be a spike in interest and administration. That is most welcome. However, in fully supporting the Bill, I gently make the point that I look forward to hearing confirmation from the Government that they will support the Bill with the necessary financial backing.

It is very important not only that everyone has their say but that we pass the Bill in the time available, so I will conclude my remarks. I fully support and welcome the Bill. Many people deserve credit for getting it to this stage, not least the hon. Member for Coventry North West, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central and many others. The Government have supported the Bill. The Minister has been tireless in personally driving it forward and I thank her for that. I also thank the other parties in this House—the Bill has received cross-party support. It is refreshing in these times, when we seem on a daily basis to talk about conflict in the political arena, that we have an issue that has rightly brought all sides of the House together. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) in thanking the Daily Mirror. That is perhaps unusual on the Conservative Benches, but, working with Max Johnson’s family, it has been instrumental in pushing this forward.

It has been a pleasure to support the Bill at every stage. I have done so while thinking of Max and Keira. It is their Bill. Let us not forget that it is thanks to the brave decision taken by Keira’s dad on that most difficult of days that four more people are alive today who otherwise might not be. I can think of no better reason than that to ensure the Bill reaches the statute book as soon as possible.

1.47 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to be in Westminster today. I genuinely believe that the vast majority of people who stand for Parliament do so because they want to make the world a better place. I have to admit that on many days I wonder, when I sit on the train on my way home, whether we have actually achieved very much in that regard. Today, however, we have done three exceptional things.

The first Bill will enable tenants to take action against rogue landlords. It will make a real difference to the lives of many of my Chelmsford constituents. The second Bill will mean that mothers will have their names on the marriage certificates of their daughters, a step forward for equality that should have happened many years ago. It will also mean that anyone who wants to can join their partner in a civil partnership, which is so much the right thing to do. Finally, I am so proud to be here for this Bill on organ donation and a register. I know that lots of people, when they look at our proceedings, think that there are only a tiny number of Members in the Chamber. Actually, there are many, many more hon. Members in Parliament today just in case a vote is needed.

I would like to put on record my huge thanks to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who have helped to drive these Bills through Parliament. As an Essex woman MP, I give huge thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on the Government Front Bench, who as the Minister responsible has steered the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill. I also thank the other woman Essex MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is hiding behind the Speaker’s Chair right now—she has actually just come back—and who as Whip has been key in making sure there are lots of Members here to support the Bill.

I am pleased to support the Bill because organ donation saves lives. For many people, it is the only way their life can be saved, but the system needs changing. According to statistics from the British Heart Foundation, as of last Friday, 6,198 people in this country were waiting for an organ donor, and 285 of those were waiting for a heart transplant. The good news is that more and more people are putting themselves on the register, which is excellent, but the sad news is that it is not keeping pace with the number of people who need a transplant.

Eight out of 10 people in the UK support organ donation, but only one in three are on the register. We need to change that, especially for people from black and minority ethnic communities—one in five of the people who die while waiting for a transplant are from those communities—so I thank the Minister for the helpful toolkit in our inboxes today. It will help us as Members of Parliament to reach out to those communities and give them the necessary information and reassurance to encourage them on to the register.
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly references the very important toolkit, which will be useful in sharing information about this new policy with our constituents, but does she agree that for it truly to work we need to educate people about why the Bill is so vital?

Vicky Ford: I thank my other fellow Essex MP for his excellent point. Essex MPs get things done, as do we all.

I try to think about what has worked in other countries, and it is clear from other countries that an opt-out system makes a difference. As my hon. Friend points out, however, it must go hand-in-hand with information systems and improving the resources available to our excellent health service staff. That is key to ensuring best practice. In countries that have introduced an opt-out system as part of a wider package of measures, it is associated with an increase in the number of donations and lives saved.

I support the soft opt-out system, as it is called, under which family members can say that they do not want their love one’s organs used for donation. It is important that family members have that choice. I have been struck listening to family members who have made that difficult decision after losing a loved one—we just heard the beautiful example of the young lady whose heart went to Max—talk about how much pride and hope it has given them to find out that their loss has been used, with families destroyed and children without parents.

Having said all that, I believe that with a clear and detailed communications strategy following the introduction of the system, and with investment in the right health structures to give our outstanding NHS workers the resources they need, the Bill will make the world a much better place for many of our constituents. Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker, for making sure we all came here today to pass these Bills.

1.54 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): This private Member’s Bill has my full support. It was introduced by the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robison) and inspired by the Daily Mirror campaign to find an organ donor for a little boy from Cheshire, Max Johnson, whom we have heard so much about this afternoon from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and many others.

In preparing for this debate, I was saddened to learn of just how many people lose their lives due to the lack of a suitable donor. In adopting this Bill, England would have a similar system to Wales, essentially an opt-out system where consent would be presumed unless otherwise stated.

There is already overwhelming public support for organ donation. According to the NHS Blood and Transplant website, over 80% of adults in England say they would definitely donate or would consider donating their organs, but only 37% of the UK population have registered as a donor on the NHS organ donor register.

While the then nine-year-old Max was the inspiring story behind the Daily Mirror campaign, at any one time there are more than 6,000 people waiting to have life-saving transplants. I spoke to one such person, a chap in my local West Cumberland Hospital, during his dialysis treatment in our new renal unit just last month. There are still many desperately sad accounts of lives being lost, with families destroyed and children without their parents.

The Johnson family spent almost eight months on a transplant ward; they said it was a “rollercoaster” of a year, sometimes worrying that their son’s weight might have dropped too low to continue on the transplant list. After 196 days of waiting, a tragically fatal car crash resulted in a suitable heart donation from a little girl, Keira Ball. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, and of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) in his emotional speech, in expressing admiration for Keira’s family.

Being a mum of four daughters myself, I was devastated to learn of other accounts, particularly that of Jade Gulliver’s sister. Jade, a mum to two little boys, died at just 27 while waiting for a liver transplant. She had viral hepatitis. Her sister said:

“You hear about transplants on the telly, but you never expect it to happen to someone you know. She kept getting sicker and sicker. I can’t explain what it was like—waiting every day for a phone call that never came. We take the boys to the bench we have in Jade’s memory for birthdays and anniversaries and we show them pictures.”

Jade’s sister went on:

“I will be the first to admit, before this tragedy, I also was almost ignorant to organ donation. Now I want to do everything in my power to prevent this from happening, so that no more families have to go through what our family has been through, and is still going through.”

It is not at all difficult to opt in. In fact, while preparing for my speech last night I decided that, in order to speak with any conviction and to be in an honest position to encourage the country to take the decision to donate, I at least needed to ensure that I had joined the register, so that is exactly what I did. But what dawned on me at that time, working late in my office here in Parliament and enjoying a mug of coffee and looking forward to getting back up to Cumbria to see my family and friends at the weekend, was how relatively relaxed I felt about making a decision that could only come into effect after my death. Online, I made a choice to donate all the bits of me that could ever be useful, and was rewarded for my choice by being informed that my decision could improve or save up to nine lives. I could instead have individually chosen my heart, lungs, kidney, liver, corneas, pancreas, tissue or small bowel, or any combination of them.

After I had registered, the website encouraged me to take three next steps to make clear my decision to my loved ones. It gave me advice on how to introduce the conversation, how to explain that my decision could improve or even save a life and how to tell them why and how I had arrived at my decision. I have had this conversation many times at home: it is a popular topic around our kitchen table with my four daughters. Personally, I have a positive outlook on life and understand that the only certainty in life is death, but it is a much more difficult to have that conversation with my husband. We are all different. One thing is sure: if the worst had happened, and if my daughters and husband, or my mum and dad, had been forced to make that decision shortly after my sudden death, it would have been very difficult for them.
Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill

2.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It really is a pleasure to confirm the Government’s support for this important measure from the Dispatch Box today. I join other Members in sending my good wishes to the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) has been fantastic at telling their story. One of the joys of doing this job—I always feel inadequate and utterly humbled—is meeting donor families. It is great to have the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) here, because we should not forget live donors and their altruism. It is incredible that people will make such donations voluntarily and, it must be said, at great personal risk. Giving the gift of life is something that donors and their families should be proud of, and I never fail to be inspired by those stories. We think today not only of those who benefit from organ transplants and those on the waiting list—we hope to be able to save more of them—but of donors and their families, without whom we would not be having this debate. I thank them all.

The real objective of this Bill is to ensure that we improve the chances of the thousands of people who are desperately waiting for a transplant. Again, I totally associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central when he introduced the Bill, because it will not achieve the degree of change that we want on its own, but one of the happy advantages of this Bill and of the Daily Mirror’s campaign is that we have raised awareness of organ donation. Such things were rare 40 years ago, but donation has almost become so commonplace that people may think, “That is somebody else’s problem. I don’t need to worry about registering my preference. Somebody else will do it. There isn’t the need.” Well, there is a huge need. We also need to remind people that dialysis is a life-saving process, but it is not nice. We have become desensitised to just how challenging such illnesses are.

The Bill provides us with a fantastic opportunity to raise awareness of the whole organ donation issue, which I have been pushing NHSBT to take full advantage of, and I am pleased to say that it has. We will obviously have to build on that progress as the Bill moves forward. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon pressed me on that, and if the hon. Member for Coventry North West was here, he would have done the same. I can tell the House that we will be investing £18 million over the next three years to raise awareness of the new scheme and to encourage people to register their wishes and have conversations with their families, which is by far the most important thing. There will be £18 million over the first three years, but ongoing communication to raise awareness will very much be part of how we take things forward.

If Members and anyone watching today have not had that conversation with loved ones about their wishes in the event of their death, please have it. The last thing we want is for loved ones, in the unhappy event of a loss of a life, to be put into a position where they have to make a judgment not knowing the true wishes. We have heard how people have approached that and doing so is immensely brave. I sometimes hear from donor families that the decision was easy because they had had that conversation, and I cannot repeat that message often enough.

I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central when he said that the Bill is not about the state taking control of people’s organs. Organ donation is a gift, and that is a fundamental principle of the Bill. We are altering the basis on which people’s wishes can be expressed, which will have the effect of altering the conversation at the bedside when it
most needs to take place. However, we will continue to invest in the specialist nurses who are trained to have those conversations in the most sensitive way. It is important that they are specialists, because the surgeons and medical staff who are emotionally invested in trying hard to save a life should not be the ones who then must have that conversation with the family—that clearly would not work.

I totally endorse the argument that, in addition to the new system, the accompanying measures relating to all support staff and communication will contribute to an increase in the number of organs available for transplant. It is only by taking those measures together, rather than in isolation, that the scheme will be successful.

In the time remaining, I want to address some issues that have arisen. There is a lot of nervousness. People are inhibited from signing up to organ donation mostly by a sense of mistrust—of institutions of the state and of medical professionals—and because they do not really know what happens. I want to put some points on the record to calm the situation and provide reassurance.

We have talked extensively about the need for more donors from black and Asian communities because they are more likely to suffer from conditions that require a transplant. Obviously, the most successful transplants are those with a strong genetic match, so we need more of those donors.

We know that the issue is taboo in some communities. Some people believe that there are reasons of faith for not supporting transplantation. We have been working with various faith leaders to develop messages and materials to reassure people that the practice is consistent with their beliefs. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for mentioning that the Board of Deputies of British Jews supports the Bill.

We have had similar conversations with representatives of the Hindu faith, the Sikh faith and the Muslim faith, as well as with Christian Churches.

That dialogue needs to continue. It is clear that people will respond to messages from people whom they trust and respect, so it is very important that we continue to engage with faith communities. It cannot all be done at once; we need to keep chipping away and sending messages. I hope Members will use the toolkits I have circulated today. They are designed to equip Members of Parliament, who are trusted in their communities and are good advocates for the proposal, with the material to engage directly with communities.

Much reference has been made to the role of families at the bedside. There is concern that families often overrule the wishes of people who want to donate, but we need to protect the family’s ability to have that final consent. It is very easy for us to imagine situations in which we would want our wishes to be respected, but we do not know the circumstances when it comes to matters of life and death. It is very important that families have that final consent, and I emphasise that that will remain the case. I cannot emphasise enough that if people have that conversation with loved ones, their wishes are less likely to be overruled.

I remind the House that guidance on the current system of consent is detailed in a series of codes owned by the Human Tissue Authority. We will update those codes and people will have the opportunity to make representations. The idea is to have a complete, up-to-date document providing information on the approach taken in England. The guidance will cover how consent can be expressed; how people can register their wish to opt out; the role of the organ donor; and how specialist nurses will interact with families. It will also give people the opportunity to record that their faith is important, if they wish that to be an issue of consideration.

It is also worth noting that as we develop technological solutions to addressing things in the NHS, people will be able to amend their views on donation regularly by direct interface with an app. They will be able to change their mind. One day they might decide that they are happy to give their corneas and then on another decide that they are not. People will be able to make that selection and make anything that they would wish to be considered clear.

On timing, we hope that the Bill will receive Royal Assent by March, in which case the HTA is all set to go to produce a first draft of the code by May. That will be followed by a 12-week consultation on the draft guidance with stakeholders, including faith groups, so there will be another opportunity for us to address any concerns properly at that time. We expect to lay that guidance before Parliament next September. I can therefore assure the House that we intend to make use of this Bill speedily once it has received Royal Assent.

I wish to make a point about children. Obviously, children below the age of 18 will be exempt from the Bill, as they are not at the age of majority in order to make their choices known. As before, the family will be fully consulted. The safeguard will be as it is now, and children are always dealt with extremely sensitively.

I have mentioned that we will continue to engage with faith groups. I wish to emphasise that NHSBT is updating and extending its faith training, so that as we can expect more conversations to be taking place on the part of specialist nurses following this change, people will be kept fully up to date with any religious and cultural issues that might need to be considered.

Finally, I wish to say something about an issue that Members may have been lobbied about: novel transplants. We have all talked a lot today about kidney, liver, heart and lung transplants, and these are the organs we are all used to talking about. Clearly, medical advances being what they are, other things will materialise; I have heard evidence of hand, face and uterine transplants. They will not be covered by the Bill. They will be exempted by our introducing regulations that exempt certain organs from the deemed consent procedure. We have done it that way because this Bill needs to be able to have a life and to respond to medical advances, so it is better to have regulations that enable us to exclude rather than to have a list of organs that are covered. In that way, it is easier to keep this law in date.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Does my hon. Friend know whether the proposals she has set out on protecting parts of the body such as hands and the other things she mentioned will be marrying up with legislation going through the devolved legislatures now? Will we therefore have a similar code of practice across the entire UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Just as this Bill has progressed with good will from those in all parts of this House, so it has progressed with good will from all nations. We
have all been sharing our experience to make sure that we get this right. So I am sure that that will be taking place in a consistent way.

In conclusion, as I said at the beginning, I am so proud that I have been able to play my part in taking this Bill forward. I am so grateful for the good will from both sides of the House in taking this forward. It has been a fantastic piece of cross-party working. It has made the process quick and speedy, and we have all been focused on what we are trying to achieve, which is to save more lives. I am very confident that Max’s and Keira’s law will have a very positive impact on how we treat people with organ failure and that it will also kick-start a cultural change in how we address these issues. In fact, it already has: people are talking about organ donation much more and joining the organ donor register at increased rates. I hope that the House will give the Bill its wholehearted endorsement.

2.19 pm

**Dan Jarvis:** With the leave of the House, and on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) as well as myself, I thank all Members who have contributed to and supported this important debate. We have seen the House at its very best with Members from right across the political spectrum working together to deliver meaningful, real change on behalf of their constituents. I take this opportunity to extend formally my thanks to my Front-Bench colleagues for their support, to the Minister, of course, to the Government and to all the officials who have made this possible.

The Bill is a welcome measure that will make a huge difference to thousands of people right around our country. Max and Keira’s law will save lives and give hope to many. I look forward to the Bill receiving Royal Assent at the earliest available opportunity. As many Members have said, this is only part of the process by which we increase awareness and encourage the most important conversations around organ donation. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate and supported the Bill’s safe passage through the House. It is much appreciated.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*
[Anne Marie Morris]

themselves up as physician associates, which they can
do now, if they are not properly trained, educated and
qualified to work in the role, because they have considerable
levels of responsibility.

If we are to enhance the professional credibility of
this group of professionals, as the Government and I
wish to do, we need national recognition of the role.
That is what the Bill would provide.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)
(Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward
her Bill. Does she agree that any regulation must not do
anything to prevent people from taking up the profession
of physician associate? She and the previous Secretary
of State have spoken about its importance, and the
current Secretary of State agrees, as do the devolved
Assemblies in Cardiff and Edinburgh. Physician associates
are employed to fill many jobs in the national health
service across the United Kingdom. Does she agree that
regulation, which I am sure we all back in principle,
must not in practice put anybody off taking up the
profession which, as she said, is vital?

Anne Marie Morris: I totally agree with my hon.
Friend. I would say that the Bill will make the job more
attractive. The reality is that physician associates cannot
fully take on the role that we need them to take on
because they cannot prescribe and they cannot authorise
X-rays, which they would be able to do if they were
regulated. That is an important next step. The Government
would like physician associates to be able to do such
things so that the workload burden on general practice
and those working in A&E is reduced.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I want to press my
hon. Friend on whether she thinks the Bill might lead to
savings that we could reinvest in the NHS because it
would allow these people to do more within the regulated
professions that individuals can quite competently fulfil. The concern
is that this is about not replacing doctors, but enabling
them to do the specialised tasks that only they are able
to do and to pass down to others roles that those
individuals can quite competently fulfil. The concern
has been raised that by having these professionals regulated
alongside doctors by the General Medical Council, we
might put them into competition with doctors. I reject
that concept because we have a shortage of doctors and
we need as many individuals as possible to be medically
qualified. It is therefore the right thing to do.

That brings me to a brief comment, before my time
elapses, on why the GMC should regulate physician
associates. It should do so because physician associates work very closely with doctors. They perform very
similar functions and work under their supervision.
They need to be regulated by a body that truly understands
them, in the same way that nursing associates came
under the Nursing and Midwifery Council when they
were regulated. It is very important that these individuals
are held to the same standards and that there is alignment
across the piece in how they are educated. The GMC
has a long history and wealth of experience in regulating
doctors, so I think that it is the right body for this
purpose. I sincerely hope that the Government will
support the Bill and I commend it to the House.

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday
23 November.

Business without Debate

LEASEHOLD REFORM BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

LICENSEING OF TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE
VEHICLES (SAFEGUARDING AND ROAD
SAFETY) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (2 February),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

FOOD INSECURITY BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

LIVE ANIMAL EXPORTS (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE AND PAY
(EXTENSION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.
AUTOMATIC ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY (CITIZENSHIP) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS (IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND TARGETS) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCISEMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (11 May),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 November),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

MARRIAGE (SAME SEX COUPLES) (NORTHERN IRELAND) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

HOUSE OF LORDS (EXCLUSION OF HEREDITARY PEERS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

PRIVATE LANDLORDS (REGISTRATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

YOUTH (SERVICES AND PROVISIONS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

VIOLENT CRIME (SENTENCES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

ALCOHOL (MINIMUM PRICING) (ENGLAND) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

PACKAGING (EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

ASSET FREEZING (COMPENSATION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

FOOTBALL OFFENCES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.
LEGALISATION OF CANNABIS (MEDICINAL PURPOSES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

LOCAL HEALTH SCRUTINY BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

HOLOCAUST (RETURN OF CULTURAL OBJECTS) (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

JUNE BANK HOLIDAY (CREATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Second Reading what day?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The first sitting Friday in 2019, as required by Standing Orders.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): You need to name a date.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 January 2019.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I would like to get through these motions.

Mr Bone: It is relevant to this point. Obviously, your ruling is unquestionable, Sir, but Standing Order No. 14 requires the appointment of private Members’ days. We know that the Leader of the House will do that in 2019, but we have the farce here of every Member having to name a date in November because the other dates are not announced. It seems to me that Members should be perfectly entitled to request a future private Members’ day, which we already know will be given by the Leader of the House, because she has committed to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In fairness, you are correct to name the date under Standing Orders, and I am sure that you will have helped the Whips with your little clarification to assist them with your future challenges ahead. Right, let us continue.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE COMMISSION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Second Reading what day?

Mr Bone: I would try, Sir, the second private Members’ day allocated in 2019, but that appears to be out of order, so can we try 18 January 2019?

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 January 2019.

HOSPITAL (PARKING CHARGES AND BUSINESS RATES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 1 February 2019.

PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS (LIMITATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (EXTENSION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

POSTAL VOTING BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE (CO-FUNDING AND CO-PAYMENT) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES (BORROWING AND INVESTMENT) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

PRINCIPAL LOCAL AUTHORITIES (GROUNDS FOR ABOLITION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

COASTAL PATH (DEFINITION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS AND RETIREMENTS (AGE LIMITS) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 January 2019.

BBC LICENCE FEE (CIVIL PENALTY) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 January 2019.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (DEFINITION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

BENEFITS AND PUBLIC SERVICES (RESTRICTION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

ELECTRONIC CIGARETTES (REGULATION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

RIVERS AUTHORITIES AND LAND DRAINAGE BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

FORENSIC SCIENCE REGULATOR BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

HOME EDUCATION (DUTY OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES) BILL [LORDS]
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

LOCAL ELECTRICITY BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.
CREDITWORTHINESS ASSESSMENT BILL
[LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

PETITION

Closure of Finedon Health Centre

2.42 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Finedon, a small town that can be traced back to the Domesday Book. It has two medical centres, both of which are branches of other medical centres. One of them is being forced to close because it is not up to standard, and we need to find a solution whereby we have proper medical facilities in the town. Three constituents have signed the lead part of the petition: Mr Ray Ogle, Mr Laurence Harper and Councillor Barbara Bailey. I would like to thank them for their help in getting this petition to the House.

The petition, to the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, reads:

The Humble Petition of residents of Finedon, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed closure of the Health Centre in Finedon should not proceed on the grounds of the loss of business to the Finedon pharmacy; further that its closure would cause longer waiting times at the only other GP practice in Finedon, difficulty for vulnerable patients in travelling to other GP practices and the loss of a support network for constituents.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department of Health and Social Care and Nene Clinical Commissioning Group to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and decline to close the Finedon Health Centre.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002279]}
in April 2017 to this February, 24,600 people had started on the programme and 9,300 were still on it. Is the Minister able to provide the House today, after another six months, with an update on those figures? As far as I know, there are no figures in the public domain other than those in the answer I received at that time. The obvious and important question is: what has become of the 15,300 who started on the programme and then left it? I asked a series of questions about this—for example, how many of them had gone on to an apprenticeship—and in reply to each the Minister’s colleague said that he did not know and that it would be disproportionately expensive to find out.

It is now 10 years since I was a Minister in the Department, but I cannot believe that the Department has forgotten the importance it attached at that time to evidence about effectiveness. Indeed, if the Minister is doubtful about the value of such data, he should read some of the speeches that the current Secretary of State made about the Work programme when she was the Minister responsible for employment. The Work Programme, for all its many faults, generated a great deal of valuable, published performance data. I understand that Ministers intend to publish comparable data for the Work and Health programme in due course, in some detail and with reasonable regularity, although I also understand that publication of that data has been delayed. It would be puzzling if Ministers really do not intend to gather, still less publish, evaluation data on the youth obligation.

On 26 April, I asked how many of those supported through the youth obligation had gone on to various destinations. The Minister for Employment replied on 1 May in a written answer, stating:

“It is not possible to say how many of them have subsequently gone on to (a) an apprenticeship (b) a traineeship and (c) a work placement without checking individual records, which would incur disproportionate cost.”

I asked how many young people had stopped receiving benefits since beginning the youth obligation, and an answer from 1 May stated:

“DWP does not hold this information as part of any centralised management information process. To answer this would require checking individual records at each Jobcentre, which would incur disproportionate cost.”

I tabled more questions on 6 September, and on 11 September the Minister for Employment replied, more encouragingly:

“The information requested is not currently readily available, however the Department does monitor requests we receive for new statistics and consider whether we can produce and release analysis that will helpfully inform public debate. The Department is therefore looking at this issue with a view to seeing what statistics could be produced on a regular basis.”

I hope that the Minister will provide us with an update on the Department’s thinking on the matter.

Although the Department is not able to say how the youth obligation is going, others have started to provide valuable information about the effectiveness of the programme. Their findings so far are not encouraging, and I want to quote this afternoon from two pieces of research. Centrepoint, drawing on funding from the Trust for London, commissioned the University of Warwick to evaluate the extent to which the youth obligation supports disadvantaged young people into employment, education or training. The researchers undertook longitudinal research in London and Manchester, including a survey of 50 youth obligation participants. Centrepoint has collected interim findings, with a final report due to be published in the spring. Those interim findings concluded that only around half of those who started the youth obligation programme remained on it for the whole six-month period. That was not generally because the participants found work or entered training; instead, there were three key reasons for withdrawing from the programme.

First, 45% of London participants and 40% of Manchester participants left the programme because of continuing, pre-existing difficulties in their lives, such as homelessness, drug or alcohol problems, or mental health issues. Secondly, 45% of London participants and 57% of Manchester participants left because they ran into a specific problem, and afterwards—through fear, embarrassment or uncertainty about their continued status on the programme—did not go back. Thirdly, 10% of London participants and 3% of Manchester participants left because they did not like the programme. That included two participants with learning difficulties who found the activities they were asked to engage in impossible without support, which they said they were not offered.

Research found that the most positive aspect of the programme was the initial engagement, and nearly two thirds of participants thought that making an individual plan that identified their interests and the support they wanted was helpful. Beyond that the focus was on practical mechanisms for identifying and applying for jobs, such as how to write a CV and use websites. In the experience of those who took part, there appeared to be little acknowledgement of whether the participant was ready to find work, or of the specific barriers that many participants faced or how to mitigate them. For example, one participant with low qualifications commented:

“They just tell you how to make a CV. Then they tell you to make it a different way. Like every day, that’s all we did.”

Most participants were happy with their work coach, but there did not seem to be much substantive personalisation. Participants rarely noted that they had been offered access to particular activities or services to meet their specific aspirations, or additional or specialised support to address their more complex needs. Despite the complex needs of quite a number of the participants, referrals outside Jobcentre Plus were rare. In interviews, participants noted that they thought their work coach did not have time to discuss issues not directly related to looking for work.

A significant group of participants held very negative views about Jobcentre Plus and expected to be treated poorly. This made them less likely to disclose issues that were hindering their ability to work, such as worsening mental health or addiction issues. It also resulted in some participants viewing reasonable advice from the Jobcentre very negatively. In both London and Manchester, the sanction rate for those on the youth obligation was higher than for the comparator group claiming benefits in a non-youth obligation area. Some 36% of London youth obligation participants were sanctioned at some point in the past year, compared with 24% in non-youth obligation areas.
The second piece of research I want to draw on has been published today by the Young Women's Trust. It is brand new and I appreciate that the Minister and his officials may well not yet have had a chance to consider it. However, it, too, is a useful and informative piece of work. The research surveyed over 700 young Jobcentre Plus users in the UK over three years. It conducted interviews with staff in 13 jobcentres across three London boroughs and conducted focus group interviews with 28 young people aged between 18 to 25 who were living across 10 different London boroughs. It concluded that the youth obligation is misunderstood by Jobcentre Plus staff and is patchy in its implementation. Young people’s employment outcomes are not recorded and there is little plan for support beyond six months. Only a third of young women and two fifths of men surveyed felt they were getting personal support from their work coach. Some 21% of black, Asian and minority ethnic jobseekers said they were treated unfairly by Jobcentre Plus staff, compared with 15% of white jobseekers.

One youth obligation manager described their package for young people as intense specialist support for six months, which I think is what Ministers intended. Another manager, however, explained that over the course of six months they “have two workshops where young people can learn how to write a good CV and meet providers”.

That appeared to be it. Managers in all the boroughs studied acknowledged that they do not monitor referrals and that there is no effective monitoring system in place, as the Minister’s difficulty in answering my parliamentary questions also illustrates. The policy, as I understand it, is that after six months on the programme, if young people do not have a job they should go on to a mandated apprenticeship or voluntary work experience. That is not happening in practice, according to the published research. In a small survey of voluntary sector service providers who work in youth employability and training, 79% were completely unaware of the youth obligation scheme, including a fair number of those who work with their local Jobcentre Plus on a weekly or monthly basis.

The report presents the positive conclusion that there has been a 17% increase in the number of users saying that the jobcentre helped to motivate them in their job search since 2016. However, it also reports that of the young women using Jobcentre Plus over the last three years, 52% have ranked their experiences as humiliating and 65% as stressful and that 63% have felt ashamed to go to the jobcentre.

It is clear from both pieces of research that the programme is not going well. I understand that one of the problems for the Department is that the universal credit IT system does not provide the basic information that would allow an assessment of how the programme is doing—information that was routinely provided under the older systems. I recognise that providing evaluation data may well not be the top priority among the current difficulties with the universal credit IT system, which I have been following closely for the last eight years, but I am sure the Minister will agree that it needs to be fixed.

I am encouraged that the Minister’s colleague told me in his written answer last month that the Department is considering what statistics could be produced on a regular basis, and so I want to finish by suggesting what some of the statistics ought to be. I would hope they could be produced at least on a half-yearly or perhaps on a quarterly basis—statistics on the Work programme were published quarterly.

We need to know how many people have gone on to the youth obligation in the latest period and how many have left it, and how many were on the programme at the beginning of the period and at the end. It would also be helpful to know something about the age, geographic spread and gender of participants. For those who have left the programme, the crucial information we need is where they have gone: how many have gone on to an apprenticeship, in line with the policy intent; how many have gone on to a traineeship or work placement; how many have gone into education or training; how many have got a job; and how many have stopped claiming benefit but not started work or training. Finally, what is the sanction rate for those on the programme?

I welcome the fact that, as I understand it, by the end of this year we will again have a nationwide labour market support programme for unemployed young people, but we need to know how effective it is. At risk of teaching my grandmother to suck eggs, I make the obvious point that that requires at least basic data to be recorded, collected centrally and published. At the moment, none of that is being done for this programme. I hope the Minister can provide some reassurance that it will soon start being done, for the Department’s benefit and the benefit of us all.

3.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this debate. I have been asked to respond because the Minister for Employment sadly cannot be here.

Everyone on the Government Benches acknowledges that the right hon. Gentleman should be on the Opposition Front Bench, given his massive experience at the Department for Work and Pensions, and I welcome this opportunity both to debate this matter and to discuss in the more detail the subject of youth employment, which I think motivates every single Member of Parliament. We all want to improve the life chances of those whom we represent.

Nationally, the employment rate for 18 to 24-year-olds not in full-time education is 77%, which is up eight percentage points from 69% in 2010, and only 4.3% of young people aged 16 to 24 are unemployed or not in full-time education, which is a fall of 350,000 since 2010. Moreover, the national unemployment rate for this age group is 10.8%, as the right hon. Gentleman set out, which is a record low. It is worth commenting briefly that the decrease in youth unemployment is markedly better than that in the EU. When one compares our record low youth unemployment rate with that in Spain, at 34%, Italy, at 32%, France, at 21%, and Greece, at 39%, one realises that there has genuinely been a transformation, and one that I believe is among the driving successes of this Government. We all accept, I believe—I think the right hon. Gentleman accepts this—that the single biggest driver of social mobility and improvement of life chances is work, and the reality is that the universal credit programme and the Government
reforms since 2010 are helping to create an employment revolution in this country, which is a massive improvement on the old system.

The statistics reflect a real achievement, but while this is worth celebrating we must not be complacent. That is why the Government have introduced a wide range of support for younger people. The principle of support for young people is well known to the right hon. Gentleman, it has dated back through many different Governments and has been developed by the DWP in collaboration with a variety of organisations. We recognise that providing early targeted help at the start of a young person’s adult life helps them secure work and avoid unemployment. It is in that context that we introduced the youth obligation support programme.

The programme is for people aged 18 to 21 who make a new claim in a UC full service jobcentre. It is worth understanding how this programme came into being, and I will briefly outline that. We believe it takes the best types of support that previous individual evaluations have shown to work and puts them together in a single programme. The support starts with the intensive activity period. In 2016, the Department published an evaluation of this approach by the Institute for Employment Studies. It reported that it had an immediate positive behavioural effect on participants. It increased their confidence, and meant they engaged in a wider range of job search activities and made job applications to a higher standard. Earlier this year, the Work and Pensions Committee recognised in its youth employment report of 2018 that the Department had conducted a good quality trial of intensive activity. It said that the intensive activity element of the youth obligation should help young people overcome key barriers to work. We believe it encourages young people to think more broadly about their skills and job goals and identify any training they may need.

An example that applies to both the programme under discussion and the traditional model for younger people are sector-based work academies, which last for up to six weeks and include work experience, some bespoke training and a guaranteed interview for a real apprenticeship or other job. The Department published a quantitative impact assessment in 2015 that showed that young people who took part in this type of support spent on average considerably more days in employment and considerably fewer days on benefit than those who did not take part, and I know it had some success in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency of East Ham, particularly utilising the work of his local colleges.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful for the way the hon. Gentleman is answering my questions. Does he have any information about how many participants on the youth obligation programme had the opportunity of the sector-based work academy to which he refers?

Guy Opperman: I am going to come to the specific points the right hon. Gentleman raises. I am taking on board his suggestions, which have been noted, on statistical evaluations and pathways. He will understand that the Department takes these matters very seriously, and I will ensure that they are taken back to the Minister for Employment. As I have said, the programme is still being rolled out, and the automated management information process is still being developed as we speak. He raised the matter of young people in particular, and there is one point on which I want to push back. He said that the was no other programme for young people, but he will surely know that the Department is committed to providing targeted support for all young people, including those who are still claiming jobseeker’s allowance or claiming through the universal credit live service. The traditional JSA includes basic skills training, traineeships and support funded through organisations such as the Prince’s Trust. There are also opportunities involving sector-based work academy placements for those individuals. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that there is no other programme over and above the youth obligation support programme.

I repeat that we collect information on each individual claimant, but there is not at this stage an aggregated assessment of the kind that the Department traditionally produces. However, the right hon. Gentleman will understand that this programme started only in April 2017, that it has not finished being rolled out and that in some jobcentres it started only in the last week. With respect, therefore, I would say to him that we believe the programme is becoming more mature every day, that we

However, the right hon. Gentleman surely accepts that sector-based work academies, which occur in many different types of profession but in particular teaching, retail, hospitality, transport and logistics, social care, manufacturing and engineering, are one of the most successful innovations that apply to all young people whether on the YOSP or the traditional support provided by jobcentres.

In addition, there are traineeships. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I have visited a multitude of jobcentres. In the last year, I have been from Hastings and Chichester in the south to Banff in northern Scotland, from Basildon to Blackpool last Friday, to Birmingham and Lambeth in London, and in the last four years I have hosted a jobs fair in Hexham and worked with my jobcentre, and I have seen the impact of traineeships, which are another part of the YOSP that are utterly key. I must mention Release Potential in my constituency, which provides these traineeships for younger people on an ongoing basis up and down the country, and I have seen their success.

The right hon. Gentleman will realise that this programme began only in April 2017 and that it is still being rolled out around the country. More than 500 jobcentres are now offering this support, but some started only this week. I accept that others started in April 2017, but I believe that the programme still has to be rolled out to 22 jobcentres before completion takes place at the end of this year. In his own area, jobcentres have strong links to Barking and Dagenham College, and there is also specialist guidance on training, apprenticeships, the Prince’s Trust, the movement to work programme, the construction skills programme and English language classes.

I want to address a couple of points that the right hon. Gentleman raised. I take on board his suggestions, which have been noted, on statistical evaluations and pathways. He will understand that the Department takes these matters very seriously, and I will ensure that they are taken back to the Minister for Employment. As I have said, the programme is still being rolled out, and the automated management information process is still being developed as we speak. He raised the matter of young people in particular, and there is one point on which I want to push back. He said that the was no other programme for young people, but he will surely know that the Department is committed to providing targeted support for all young people, including those who are still claiming jobseeker’s allowance or claiming through the universal credit live service. The traditional JSA includes basic skills training, traineeships and support funded through organisations such as the Prince’s Trust. There are also opportunities involving sector-based work academy placements for those individuals. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that there is no other programme over and above the youth obligation support programme.

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are continuing to test and learn and that we are holding workshops with work coaches to get their insight into what works well and into the local barriers that 18 to 21-year-olds can face in the labour market. We are also collating and sharing good practice, and we will obviously take on board the reports that he has outlined today, including the one that came out just this morning. We are genuinely committed to ensuring that any 18 to 21-year-old, whether they are from East Ham or Hexham, Carlisle or Cardiff, has the ability to work towards securing an income, to develop their skills and to improve their life chances. After all, that is what this is all about.

Question put and agreed to.

3.13 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 29 October 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

ESOL Classes

1. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): If he will extend Government support for English for Speakers of Other Languages classes to include newly arrived asylum seekers.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like first to express how shocked and appalled I am at the deadly gun attack that took place this weekend at the synagogue in Pittsburgh. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in expressing our deepest sympathies for the victims and those injured, as well as their families. The UK stands shoulder to shoulder with our Jewish friends across the world and utterly condemns antisemitism in all its forms.

My thoughts today are also with the friends and families of the victims of the terrible crash at Leicester City football club. I thank the emergency services for their response to this awful tragedy. I know that they did their absolute best.

Turning to Question 1, Government support towards integration is given through English language tuition, but it is available only once asylum seekers are recognised as refugees. This focuses resources on those recognised as being in need of protection.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Given the limitations on ESOL budgets, will he assure me that sufficient funding will be available to support the plan that he has in this area?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question. It is right that we support those who are given protection in ways to integrate into British life, and language is important to that. I assure him that we have a good budget in this area; in 2016-17, it was £99 million of the total adult learning budget.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that perhaps the success of the Jewish community in this country has been its willingness to integrate, to do in Rome as the Romans do and to learn the language? That is not always the case with other ethnic groups, so it is a question not only of providing sufficient funds but of encouraging them to learn the language and become a part of our community.

Sajid Javid: It is right, of course, that this Government do more to welcome all communities and help them to integrate. That is why the Government published—I published it when I was Communities Secretary—an integration Green Paper, which we will build on. It is also worth commending the work that World Jewish Relief does to help all communities to integrate.

Mr Speaker: In the light of the terrible tragedy in Leicester, it is with particular feeling that I call Mr Keith Vaz.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the comments that he made following the death of Khun Vichai and four others in the helicopter in Leicester. Khun Vichai was an amazing man—someone who spent so much time in Leicester and did so much for the club—and he was adored by the people of Leicester. He will be greatly missed, and it is kind of the Home Secretary to mention him today.

On the substance of the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), the issue is not just English language lessons but the right to work, which goes hand in hand with being able to speak English. Will the Home Secretary look again at the rules to make sure that those who are waiting can get their right to work quicker and asylum seekers can be fully integrated in our society?

Sajid Javid: It will be a difficult time for the right hon. Gentleman’s community and he has our full support in dealing with this tragedy.

On the issue of asylum seekers and support, the right to work is also very important. He will know that after 12 months, asylum seekers start getting some rights to work, but we are always looking at what more we can do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks by the Home Secretary in relation to the terrible attack in Pittsburgh and the victims of the terrible tragedy in Leicester.

In my schools in Harrow, 161 languages are spoken and it is vital that we integrate young people, but they are getting the education. What more can we do to integrate the adults who come here and need this training, so that they can take their place in our society?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. He may recall that the integration strategy, which was launched earlier this year, talked of almost 700,000 adults in Britain who speak no or very poor English. That has led to more work in this area, especially on using members of the communities concerned as mentors to try to encourage others to take up English language learning.

Police and Fire Services: Collaboration

2. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between the police and fire services.

[907295]
The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am sure there is cross-party support for wanting our emergency services to make the best use of existing resources, and the Government are extremely active in encouraging greater collaboration, whether it be through innovation funding, the work of the Emergency Services Collaboration Working Group or legislation that enables police and crime commissioners to take on fire and resource governance where a local case exists.

Alex Burghart: As the Minister will know, Essex is a pioneer in this area, where Roger Hirst, our police and crime commissioner, has brought fire services in. Will the Minister consider allowing the pooling of capital budgets to enable better joined-up working of back offices?

Mr Hurd: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Roger Hirst is doing a fantastic job in seizing the opportunity to get more out of existing resources, and I completely understand the point about capital budgets. There are restrictions in place for good reasons, but Roger and other PCCs can already use police and fire budgets to invest in shared functions, such as joint back offices, although both fire and police budgets need to make an appropriate contribution to the shared service.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): One of the issues with capital budgets is that some services are selling their capital assets and then renting from another part of the service, which can lead to very imbalanced budgets locally. Does the Minister have a grip at the centre on the long-term impact this could have?

Mr Hurd: I recognise the point the hon. Lady is making. In taking through the enabling legislation in this area, we were careful to put restrictions in place to assure stakeholders in particular that it was not a takeover of fire budgets, for example. Restrictions are in place, and for good reasons, but we monitor the situation carefully and listen to representations on both sides of the argument.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Leicestershire police is based in Enderby in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that the collaboration between Leicestershire police, the fire service and the other emergency services the other day demonstrated the hard work that our emergency services do in Leicester and Leicestershire?

Mr Hurd: I join the Home Secretary in his remarks about the performance of the Leicestershire emergency services. Leicestershire is an excellent example of where services are going the extra mile to explore ways of working together and making the best use of existing assets and resources. As they are public assets and public resources, there is a duty to make the most of them.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Merging services is yet another ploy to promote the Government’s austerity agenda: cutting one budget rather than two. For example, in Essex, the recently merged fire service budget is now being used to prop up the local highway plan, while the Essex service is forecast to lose £8 million between 2016 and 2020. Does the Minister agree that the Government are putting the future of the fire service at risk? If austerity is really over, will he tell the House when he will speak to the Chancellor about properly funding the service, based on its community importance, rather than sporadic demand?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady could not be more wrong. We are not talking about mergers; we are talking about the imperative on those deploying public money to use it in the smartest possible way and to make the best possible use of the public resources at their disposal. It is about value for money, which of course the Labour Front-Bench team has no interest in at all.

Modern Slavery

3. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce modern slavery.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government are tackling the abhorrent crime of modern slavery both at home and overseas. We have strengthened the law enforcement response and introduced new requirements for businesses to report on slavery in their supply chains, and are transforming the support we provide to victims. Internationally, we continue to work to stop modern slavery wherever it occurs.

James Cartlidge: I strongly welcome the steps the Government are taking to tackle modern slavery. Does the Minister agree that, as we leave the EU and bring in much tougher rules on unskilled immigration from the EU, we will need to be vigilant to ensure that it does not provide new opportunities for people traffickers who may seek to exploit those tougher rules?

Victoria Atkins: Our determination to tackle modern slavery will be unaltered by our exit from the EU. On 6 September, the Government announced the introduction of a new seasonal workers pilot for horticulture, but we are of course very alert to the risks noted by the independent Migration Advisory Committee, which my hon. Friend outlined, and we will work with sectors, including the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, to ensure that migrant workers are protected against modern slavery and other labour abuse.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for chairing the Environmental Audit Committee’s inquiry into this important subject. It was a pleasure to appear before the inquiry some weeks ago. She is absolutely right: these criminals do not restrict themselves to exploiting human beings, but break every rule going. That is why we are leading a cross-governmental approach, having
regard to environmental offences as well as offences of labour exploitation, such as failing to pay the minimum wage. We want the message to go out to these criminals loud and clear that we will not tolerate modern slavery, whatever form it takes.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): Many businesses want to show more clearly how they are trying to tackle modern slavery in their supply chains, as some need to in law. Will the Minister’s modern slavery team talk to her equalities team and learn some lessons on how we are showing gender pay gap reporting, which is making that information more readily available?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the important work that she is doing on the review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, along with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and Baroness Butler-Sloss. I hope that the review will help us to tackle the problem that some—although not all—businesses have with meeting their duty under the Act to report that their supply chains are slavery-free. We have started that work already: last week, in celebration of Anti-Slavery Day, we wrote to 17,000 businesses across the country setting out our expectation of their compliance with the law.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): North Wales police was the first force in Wales to establish a modern slavery unit, working to combat human trafficking at Holyhead, which risks being a soft target for modern slavery gangs. What measures is the Secretary of State introducing to ensure that security at the port of Holyhead specifically is not compromised as a result of the UK’s leaving the EU?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the hon. Lady for her commitment to this issue. As she knows, the Home Office is taking an in-depth look at the security of our borders as we leave the EU. However, our exit from the EU does not in any way affect our determination to tackle modern slavery, and to work with our international partners to stop slavery around the world.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): The Council of Europe has been a real force for good through its proactive work to tackle modern slavery. It is entirely separate from the European Union, but will my hon. Friend confirm that we will continue to be at the forefront of the important work in that collaborative organisation?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am delighted to confirm that not only are we at the forefront in terms of the Council of Europe, but the Prime Minister is leading the world through our Nations’ global call for action to end modern slavery by 2030. We are very ambitious and determined in this regard, and the rest of the world is working with us.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): On Anti-Slavery Day, ECPAT UK—Every Child Protected Against Trafficking—handed No. 10 a petition calling for specialist support for trafficked children. No Government funds are currently available for specialist children’s care, and that leaves children vulnerable to re-trafficking. The Government must commit themselves to giving local authorities additional funds. Will the Minister agree to provide those funds to protect vulnerable children?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady will know that we are committed to the introduction of independent child trafficking advocates, and I am delighted that next year a third of local authorities will have ICTAs to look after the most vulnerable victims of trafficking. However, we have noted that the crime type is evolving. We are piloting schemes for UK-trafficked as opposed to internationally trafficked children, because we appreciate that the needs of those two different sets of children must be encompassed.

**Free Movement of People**

4. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on Scotland of ending free movement of people with the EU.

5. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on Scotland of ending free movement of people with the EU.

**The Minister for Immigration** (Caroline Nokes): After the UK leaves the EU, free movement will end. In a recent report, the Independent Migration Advisory Committee concluded that the economic impacts of EU migration had been “relatively small”, with “limited regional variation”. As we leave the EU, we will create a single global immigration system that works in the interests of the whole United Kingdom.

**Dr Whitford:** Ending freedom of movement will have a major impact on the health and social care sector, which employs high numbers of EU nationals, and the tier 2 visa threshold of £30,000 is far more than any social care worker earns. Do the Secretary of State and Minister not recognise that wealth is not the same as worth?

**Caroline Nokes:** We have been very clear that employers should take all possible steps to reduce their reliance on low-skilled migrant labour. The MAC does have serious concerns, however, about the social care sector and is clear that this sector needs a policy wider than just migration policy to fix its many problems. The MAC report has given us some sound advice, but the Home Office continues to discuss with all sectors, with business leaders and indeed with the devolved Governments so that we can come forward with an immigration policy that works for the whole country.

**Marion Fellows:** As someone who has recently been the beneficiary of care and care support, I would refute what the Minister has just said. Scottish Government analysis published in February estimates that real GDP in Scotland will be 4.5% lower by 2040 than it would otherwise have been, as a result of lower migration. Does the Minister agree that this is why immigration powers must be devolved to Scotland, so that Scotland can create a system that is fair and that meets our needs and values?
Caroline Nokes: The Government have been repeatedly clear that immigration policy remains a reserved matter. Four years ago the people of Scotland confirmed in a referendum that they wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom and we will deliver an immigration policy for every part of the UK.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): There are 115,000 people looking for work in Scotland. Does the Minister think it would be a good idea if the Scottish Government did more to help those people to acquire the skills they need to get into the workplace and build the Scottish economy, rather than just ship in more people from beyond our shores?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. It is crucial that we work across the whole of government—through our modern industrial strategy, the Department for Education, local government and the devolved Administrations—to make sure that we provide the opportunities for young people across the whole economy so that they can find work.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the news that free movement will be replaced with a single control system based on people’s skills, not where they come from. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that the future system will both facilitate the supply of foreign labour where there is a domestic shortage and complement the Government-wide approach to domestic skills to tackle the shortages where they can be addressed by upskilling UK workers?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Our first priority must be upskilling UK workers and making sure they can move into the vacancies that we know are there. My hon. Friend is always diligent in promoting the interests of businesses in Scotland, which might find it difficult to acquire the labour they need. I will be delighted to work with him in that respect.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish Government’s analysis shows that the average EU citizen working in Scotland contributes £10,400 per annum to Government revenue and £34,400 per annum to GDP. What plans have the UK Government made to mitigate the adverse economic impact on Scotland as a result of the UK Government’s decision to end free movement?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. and learned Lady will be conscious that an immigration White Paper will be coming forward very soon, but it is crucial that we reflect on the advice given to us by the independent Migration Advisory Committee, which made the point that there were only limited regional variations.

Joanna Cherry: I am very conscious of the much heralded and long awaited White Paper. However—the Minister may not know this—a nationally representative survey conducted by British Future and Hope not Hate shows that nearly two thirds of people in Scotland think the Scottish Government should have the power to decide which visas are issued to people who want to work in Scotland. Will the Minister meet me in advance of the White Paper to discuss how it will address the wishes and needs of the people of Scotland?

Caroline Nokes: I gently remind the hon. and learned Lady that Scotland will be part of a single immigration policy for the whole United Kingdom, however strongly she might argue against that, but I will be delighted to meet her after the White Paper is published, because we do not want the White Paper to be the end of the conversation, and we will still be asking business and industry leaders, representative groups, stakeholders and the devolved Administrations to give us their views.

EU Settlement Scheme

5. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the adequacy of the Government’s EU settlement scheme?

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): EU citizens make a huge contribution to our economy and society, and we want them to stay. The EU settlement scheme enables them to do so, in line with the draft withdrawal agreement. The scheme provides a simple streamlined process for residents and EU citizens and their family members to obtain their new UK immigration status.

Danielle Rowley: The Roslin Institute in my constituency conducts world-leading scientific research, and it benefits significantly from the expertise of the EU citizens who work there. Given the Government’s plans to level down the rights of EU citizens living here from 30 March onwards and the false categorisation of many scientific researchers as low-skilled, what is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that EU researchers do not find the UK a hostile environment for themselves and their families and choose to go elsewhere?

Sajid Javid: The Government are supporting all those EU citizens who wish to stay in our country. As I said, we actually want them to stay, not just because of the economic benefits they bring but because they are part of our society and part of many of our families. So we want them to stay, and as we have made clear, whether there is a deal or not, they will still be welcome to stay. Our new immigration system will continue to welcome talent from across the world.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): How does the Home Secretary propose to honour his promises to EU citizens living in the UK and to British citizens in the EU in the event of no deal? Will he now seek to negotiate and ratify a citizens’ rights agreement with the EU that would come into force if there were no wider deal?

Sajid Javid: We have made it clear that if there is no deal—which we do not expect, but we need to plan for all eventualities—all 3.5 million EU citizens in the UK will be allowed to stay and welcome to stay.

Azfar Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Today, I wrote to the Home Secretary about the Home Office illegally requiring DNA data for people’s immigration applications. We have just had the Windrush scandal, and the EU settlement scheme will be the biggest task that the Home Office has ever undertaken. With an additional 3.5 million EU citizens subject to the hostile environment, it will be a question of when, not if, another
scandal will break. The Home Secretary has committed to conducting a review of the structure and processes of the Home Office. Will that review be fully independent, and will it roll back the hostile environment?

Sajid Javid: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that the first Ministers to stand at this Dispatch Box and talk about the hostile environment were Labour Ministers. He should never forget that. Also, almost half the people affected by the Windrush saga were pre-2010. He should reflect on that as well. He is right to say that the EU settlement scheme is large and ambitious, and we are confident that it can be delivered. In our beta testing of the scheme so far, 95% of the people taking part say that it has worked very well for them.

Traveller Encampments

6. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Whether police forces are using the powers available to them to tackle unlawful Traveller encampments.

[Sajid Javid]: The distress that local communities face as a consequence of unauthorised encampments is unacceptable. The Government have recently consulted on what more can be done to ensure that existing enforcement powers are used effectively and on whether additional powers are required.

Mr Jayawardena: Will my right hon. Friend join me in unequivocally damning the disruption and antisocial behaviour caused to innocent residents by illegal Traveller encampments? May I urge him to go further and to give the police more powers to tackle trespass, from which all our constituents deserve the right to be protected?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I join my hon. Friend in that; I fully recognise that unauthorised encampments can cause the settled community significant stress. I have seen that in my own constituency of Bromsgrove, and he has seen it in his. I am not convinced that the existing powers are strong enough, which was why, as Communities Secretary, I launched a consultation, and we will be responding to it shortly.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Has the Home Secretary read “Policing by consent: Understanding and improving relations between Gypsies, Roma, Irish Travellers and the police”, the report published last week by the Traveller Movement? Will he take note of the concerns in that report that police officers still display signs of unconscious bias and racism towards the Traveller community, and will he meet the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma to discuss those concerns?

Sajid Javid: I have not yet had the opportunity to read that report, but I will certainly take a look now that the hon. Lady has mentioned it. She reminds the House that the vast majority of the Traveller community are law-abiding citizens, but there are a few, as there are in any community, who break the law through unauthorised encampments, and what people want, including perhaps people in her community, is a balanced approach.
Police Funding

9. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): If he will take steps to secure additional funding for police forces with multiple cities in their authority area. [907303]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Minister for Policing has spoken to all police forces about the demands that they face. We have increased police funding by over £460 million this year, including by providing additional flexibility through the council tax precept.

Chris Elmore: The Home Secretary will be aware that the South Wales police and crime commissioner, Alun Michael, is lobbying the Home Office for additional funding because Cardiff, as a capital city, receives no additional funding despite hosting major sporting and cultural events. Will the Home Secretary support Mr Michael's bid and deliver new funding for the South Wales police authority area?

Sajid Javid: The Minister for Policing has met the hon. Gentleman's local force—I believe he actually met the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issue—and we are giving the matter careful consideration.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Last week, the police force in Chelmsford, Essex, and its local partners came first in the country for the national Pubwatch scheme, which has reduced violent crime at night by 45%. Will the Home Secretary praise Essex police and continue to help to fund our frontline?

Sajid Javid: Essex police force has my full congratulations on what it has achieved, which shows what can be done to tackle serious violence with creative thinking. Indeed, I may well invite the force to the cross-party serious violence taskforce.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I associate myself with the Home Secretary's remarks on the tragedy in Leicester and on the horrific events in Pittsburgh. Our thoughts and prayers should be with the family and friends of the slaughtered and with the people of Pittsburgh.

The Home Secretary will be aware that the National Audit Office has clearly set out how the Government have failed to protect police funding. Does he accept that this is a mark of shame and is putting the public at risk? Since 2010, over 21,000 police officers have been cut under the Tory Government's austerity policy. All our constituents can see the consequences in delays in police action under Operation Sceptre.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department has clearly set out how the Government are very concerned about increases in knife crime and its impact on victims, families and communities. The action we are taking is set out in our serious violence strategy and includes new legislation in the Offensive Weapons Bill; the community fund to support local initiatives; the #knifefree media campaign; and continuing police action under Operation Sceptre.

David T. C. Davies: The Minister knows that the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 currently prevents the police from using past criminal convictions as grounds for determining whether a search is proportionate. Will she consider changing PACE so that people who are stopped for a legitimate reason and who are found to have a recent criminal conviction for carrying knives can actually be searched by a police officer?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend brings his experience as a special constable to the Chamber, and I am grateful for his service. We are clear that stop and search is a vital policing tool, and we are committed to tackling knife crime. Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act officers already have the power to search an individual they suspect to be carrying a knife. We therefore believe the current arrangements to be proportionate, but we will keep them under review and continue to work closely with the police to ensure they have the tools they need. I will be happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is right to talk about policing and the incredible work that the officers and staff do, but it is worth reminding the House that Labour planned to cut police spending by 5% to 10% had it won the 2015 election. Labour did promise an increase in 2017, but it was not enough, because we increased police funding by more than Labour promised—by £460 million. Labour went on to vote against that increase.

Not a single Labour MP voted for an increase in police funding when they had the opportunity, so we will not take any lectures from Labour on policing.

Knife Crime

10. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle knife crime. [907304]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government are very concerned about increases in knife crime and its impact on victims, families and communities. The action we are taking is set out in our serious violence strategy and includes new legislation in the Offensive Weapons Bill; the community fund to support local initiatives; the #knifefree media campaign; and continuing police action under Operation Sceptre.

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Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Home Secretary announced in September that the Government would adopt a public health approach to tackling knife crime, a measure recommended by the Youth Violence Commission following strong evidence that it works. When will the House be given the opportunity to debate this vital issue?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady and other hon. Members. Members on both sides of the House for their work with the Youth Violence Commission. She will know from our scrutiny of the Offensive Weapons Bill how seriously we take the public health approach—we looked at it through the development of the serious violence strategy. She will know there was a debate before the summer recess on serious violence, but I am always happy, as she knows, to debate how we help to support our police forces in tackling this terrible crime.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid there is strong pressure on time today.
Organised Crime (National Crime Agency)

11. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle organised crime through the National Crime Agency. [907305]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): We have made significant progress since the National Crime Agency was established in 2013. Capabilities have improved; partnership working is better; and we intervene earlier to prevent serious and organised crime. The agency has gone from strength to strength, with an impressive and sustained track record of disruptions across the full range of serious and organised crime threats.

Kevin Hollinrake: Thames Valley police spent £7 million investigating the HBOS Reading banking scandal. Will my right hon. Friend consider establishing regional fraud squads, which would be self-funded from the proceeds of both fines and recovered funds, to properly investigate business banking fraud and other financial crimes?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend’s suggestion is similar to what already happens through the regional organised crime units. We have injected £140 million in grant funding to help to establish them and to ensure that we put in place the right financial investigators in each region to tackle fraud.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Organised crime crosses borders, and the National Crime Agency relies on the European arrest warrant and databases and joint operations with Europol, all of which will fall if we leave the European Union without a deal in place in April. Given that Ireland has repealed its extradition arrangements to do with the previous 1957 convention, will there be any legal way to extradite organised criminals from Dublin if there is no deal?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Lady makes an important point about what happens post Brexit. She will of course know that the negotiations with Michel Barnier are all about issues like that. I suspect that Ireland will go along with whatever the EU’s deal is to implement, and we are seeking a security treaty so that we can put in place many of these important measures.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A sentence perhaps; Lloyd Russell-Moyle.

12. Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle violent crime. [907306]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): We will be launching a £200 million youth endowment fund to intervene with children at risk of serious violence; we will be consulting on a new duty to support the multi-agency approach to tackling violence; and we will be undertaking a review of drug misuse.

Wes Streeting: The recent murder of a 23-year-old man in my constituency has once again brought violent crime to the forefront of concerns in my community. My constituents understand that whether in Labour-led cities such as London or in Tory shires, cuts to police numbers are having a serious impact, which is leading to increases in violent crime across the country. When will the Home Secretary accept that and put the money back into the police that our communities need?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this. He will know that the Government have a cross-government serious violence strategy, but we do need to do more. That was why I recently announced these further steps, especially the new £200 million fund, which will help prevent violence.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to remain committed to steering young and often vulnerable people away from crime? What is the Department doing to strike a balance between prevention and robust law enforcement?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right to raise this. We have this new £200 million fund announced earlier this month, and we also have an early intervention youth fund of £22 million.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Home Secretary might not want to take any lessons from Labour on policing, but in March Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary warned that “the lives of vulnerable people could be at risk” if cuts continue. In May, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner said she was “certain” that the Government’s cuts have contributed to violent crime. In September, the National Audit Office warned that the Home Office “does not know if the police system is financially sustainable.” Last week, the Select Committee on Home Affairs declared that the police could become “irrelevant” without serious investment in today’s Budget. Every one of those warnings has been ignored by the Government. Can the Home Secretary tell us why he thinks they are all wrong and he is right?

Sajid Javid: Of course the police need to have the right mix of resources as well as other factors, which is why we have increased police funding this year by more than £460 million. But the hon. Lady also knows this is not all about resources. For example, the changes in...
drug markets are playing a big role, which is why I hope she would welcome the review that I have recently announced.

Asylum Seekers

13. Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that asylum seekers are adequately maintained and accommodated; and if he will make a statement. [907307]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to protecting the rights of asylum seekers and to ensuring that those who would otherwise be destitute are provided with accommodation and other support to meet their essential living needs. We continue to work closely with local government, the devolved Administrations, the private sector and civil society to make improvements to the services that are provided.

Chris Stephens: The Minister will be aware that, following a legal challenge in Scotland’s Supreme Court by two of my constituents and Govan Law Centre, Serco undertook to put its lock-change evictions on hold. Is she aware that Serco is verbally threatening my constituents with lock-change evictions? Does she agree that that is completely unacceptable, and will she investigate?

Caroline Nokes: It is important that the Home Office continues to work with Serco, Glasgow City Council and non-governmental organisation partners as part of a dedicated taskforce to make sure that all those individuals who are no longer entitled to asylum support or accommodation are managed appropriately. The hon. Gentleman is of course right to point out that, following his constituents’ legal challenge, no service users have been evicted while the appeal is ongoing.

Police Funding

14. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of police funding. [907308]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): As taxpayers, we are investing over £1 billion more in our police system than we were three years ago. That shows the Government’s recognition of not only the increasing demand on police and the increasing complexity of that demand, but the progress that we are making in reducing the deficit in our public finances—progress jeopardised by the current Labour Front-Bench team.

Bambos Charalambous: The Minister will no doubt be aware of the lamentable findings of the recently published Home Affairs Committee report, “Policing for the future”. Does he agree with its conclusion that without “additional funding for policing…there will be dire consequences for public safety, criminal justice, community cohesion and public confidence”?

Will he join me in calling on the Chancellor to provide substantially more funding for policing not only in my constituency of Enfield, Southgate, but throughout the country?

Mr Hurd: I agree with much of the Select Committee’s report, including on the need for more resources for policing, which is exactly what we are providing through an additional £140 million taxpayer investment in our police system this year. That is a police funding settlement that the hon. Gentleman and other Labour MPs voted against.

Topical Questions

T1. [907333] Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): It has been a busy few weeks at the Home Office as we continue in our efforts to deliver for the British people. On Thursday, regulations that allow the medicinal use of cannabis-based products will come into effect, providing relief to those people, particularly children, who have known so much pain. I shall shortly visit the United States to monitor progress on my challenge to tech giants to help us to fight child sexual exploitation. For those who fall short, there will be no place to hide.

Chris Stephens: On Friday, my constituent was supposed to be moved by Serco to new social housing accommodation, following a successful claim. However, that did not happen, and Serco removed beds, heating and £22.50 in cash. Does the Secretary of State believe that Serco is a rogue provider of services that should be removed its contract?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to take a closer look at the case that the hon. Gentleman mentions. He will know that we have consulted the Scottish Government, local government and others on a new approach, and we are confident that that new approach will bring significant improvement.

T7. [907339] Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Over the past few months, we have seen a reduction in moped crime. Does that not show what can be achieved when we take a multi-agency approach when resources are allocated and, crucially, when the police are allowed to pursue motorcyclists even though they are not wearing crash helmets?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): As a London MP, I am absolutely delighted that moped crime is down by around 50% from its terrible peak. That is the result not only of superb police action but of the work convened by the Home Office that has brought together Government, industry and civil society to bear down on the problem. So pleased are we with that work that we taking the model forward to tackle vehicle crime.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank Max Hill QC for his work as the reviewer of counter-terror legislation—a role that he left on 12 October to become the Director of Public Prosecutions. Given that his departure was announced on 24 July, why has no successor
been appointed and the post been left vacant with counter-terror legislation going through Parliament? What on earth is the Home Office excuse for this sheer negligence?

Sajid Javid: We are about to start the process for appointing Max Hill’s successor. To suggest that that has held back progress on counter-terrorism would be completely incorrect. The new counter-terrorism strategy was launched just a few months ago and sets out how seriously the Government take the issue.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In the light of the horrors of Pittsburgh, will the Government provide assurance—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This really is a matter of the utmost sensitivity, and the right hon. Lady’s question must be heard with solemnity and respect.

Theresa Villiers: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

In the light of the horrors of Pittsburgh, can the Home Secretary provide the reassurance that both the Government and the police will always take very, very seriously the security of the Jewish community and other minorities who may be subjected to hate crimes and violence?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely provide that reassurance to my right hon. Friend. In fact, this weekend, following that tragedy, I spoke to the head of the Community Security Trust to offer that reassurance. It is an organisation that we are proud to support, but we want to look at new ways of helping the community with its security needs. It is sad, in this day and age, that any community needs security of that type but, for as long as they do, we will always be there. Tonight, I will also be attending a vigil to mark the terrible tragedy at Pittsburgh.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The perpetrator of the Pittsburgh murders has a history of posting the most vile antisemitism, Islamophobia and threatening comments. Similarly, the man suspected of sending pipe bombs to prominent Democrats threatened the life of a political commentator via a tweet a few months ago, but Twitter said that that did not violate its online guidelines. In the wake of these terrible tragedies, what are the Government doing to address the very serious issue of online hate?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is again right to raise this matter. We have seen the role that social media is playing not just in Britain, but abroad, in feeding hate. That is one reason why the Government recently refreshed our anti-hate strategy and that is exactly one of the things that we will be looking into further.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): This summer, Rugby saw a number of illegal Gypsy and Traveller encampments on new housing sites. Our local councillor, Jill Simpson-Vince, brought together developers and Warwickshire police to put a protocol in place. Can the Secretary of State encourage others to follow Warwickshire’s lead?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can.

T2. [907334]Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What progress has the Minister made in compensating Windrush victims who have been made homeless and jobless by the Government’s hostile environment project?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He will know that Martin Forde QC recently asked the Government, and we agreed, to extend the consultation period for the compensation scheme so that we can make sure that we get the best responses possible and so that he can engage more widely with the community. In exceptional circumstances, the Home Office has already made payments to some individuals.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Meat and fish processing businesses in my constituency rely heavily on migrant workers. Many of their staff are highly skilled even though their skill is not formally recognised by a qualification. What steps are the Government taking to make sure that these sorts of skills are properly recognised in our future immigration policy?

Sajid Javid: Our food and drink industry is vital to the success of our economy and I know that many Cornish businesses are very successful in this sector. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will be taking these issues very seriously as we develop our new immigration system.

T3. [907335]Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): My constituent, Mr Jenkins, was born and bred in Bridgend. His wife of more than 20 years has been told that she has to leave the day before their child’s 18th birthday. Why? What sort of hostile environment destroys family life in that way?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady would care to write to me, I will look closely at the case that she has mentioned.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Next March will see the 40th anniversary of the brutal assassination of Airey Neave on these premises. Airey Neave’s family, my constituents, are seeking more information about the circumstances of the murder. I have been told that my questions on this have been transferred from the Northern Ireland Office to the Home Office. Will my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary agree to meet me and Airey Neave’s family to discuss how they can get answers on how and why Airey Neave was murdered 40 years ago?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I will.

T4. [907336]Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What will the Home Secretary do to help police forces to prioritise resources when they are faced with cannabis clubs, of which most members require cannabis for medicinal reasons, and an epidemic of Spice at the same time, which poses very serious risks to both health and law and order—both are class B drugs?

Mr Hurd: Operating priorities are local decisions, but what I can tell the hon. Lady is that the priority of the Department is to make sure that the police have the resources that they need to do their job, which was why we took steps to increase public investment in our police.
Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): May I seek an assurance from the Minister that any revised immigration policy will reflect the needs of the farming and fishing community in Scotland and indeed the whole UK?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance, and that was one reason why we recently launched a pilot for a seasonal workers agricultural scheme for 2019.

T5. [907337] Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): In the west midlands we have lost over 2,000 police officers and violent crime is on the rise. Will the Home Secretary look again at funding for West Midlands police and reverse the imposition of extra pension costs?

Mr Hurd: I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that West Midlands received more funding this year—£9.9 million—in a police funding settlement that she voted against. I will be coming to the House in early December with our proposals for 2019-20.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Town centres are at the heart of the Erewash community, but on occasion they can become the target for antisocial behaviour brought on by the misuse of drugs and alcohol. What more can be done to ensure a visible police presence in our town centres, and does my hon. Friend agree that sharing back-office functions with other emergency services to free up resources may be one solution?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am delighted to be visiting my hon. Friend on Friday to see for myself the hard work that she does in taking care of her constituents, working alongside her local police force. This Government support greater collaboration and have placed a statutory duty on police, fire and ambulance services to keep collaborative opportunities under review and enter into them in the interests of efficiency or effectiveness.

Mr Speaker: A single sentence of Hobhousian liberalism—Wera Hobhouse.

T6. [907338] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Small and medium-sized businesses are the lifeblood of most of our economy, including in my Bath constituency. However, they face many challenges in recruiting the talent they need, so will the Minister consider reforming the tier 2 visa system to make it easier and remove the prohibitive costs for smaller employers to recruit highly skilled overseas graduates from UK universities?

Mr Speaker: I think that sentence contained quite a lot of semi-colons.

Caroline Nokes: I share the hon. Lady’s admiration for small and medium-sized businesses the country over. The immigration system already facilitates recruitment of foreign graduates of UK universities by waiving many of the usual requirements. We will shortly be setting out our plans for the future immigration system, following the recent report by the Migration Advisory Committee.

Sajid Javid: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. That is exactly what we will do, and we will set out the approach in the White Paper in a few weeks.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Following on from my Adjournment debate on the subject and a letter from 20 police and crime commissioners, will the Minister confirm that he shares my concerns about the impact of Mamba and Spice on communities such as Mansfield and consider potential solutions to support local police and other services in tackling this issue?

Mr Hurd: I salute the tireless campaigning by my hon. Friend and others. Spice is a scourge of many town centres at the moment. We take independent advice on classification and we keep that independent advice under review.

Victoria Atkins: I am of course very sorry to hear that, as I am sure the entire House is. The hon. Lady will know that the Home Secretary has commissioned an independent review of drugs so that we may understand better how they are used in the 21st century, and I would of course be honoured to meet her and her constituent to discuss this.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): When we leave the European Union, we will of course have control of all aspects of immigration policy. Does the Home Secretary agree that we can then prioritise higher-skilled immigration as a way of boosting our nation’s productivity?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. That is exactly what we will do, and we will set out the approach in the White Paper in a few weeks.

T8. [907340] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Tomorrow, Martha Fernback would have turned 21, but sadly her young life was cut short when at 15 she took an overdose of ecstasy. Her mother, Anne-Marie, now campaigns tirelessly for a new, evidence-based approach to drugs policy. Will the Secretary of State consent to meeting Anne-Marie to hear why she believes a new approach is necessary?

Victoria Atkins: I am of course very sorry to hear that, as I am sure the entire House is. The hon. Lady’s local police force will be sharing back-office functions with other emergency services to keep collaborative opportunities under review.

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Mr Speaker: She did. Otherwise we would have to have a reprise.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I was delighted to go to her constituency over the summer to meet soft fruit farmers who made a compelling case for a seasonal workers scheme. She will no doubt be delighted that the Government are having a pilot in the horticultural sector to make sure that it can access the labour that it needs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Where is that new young Member, John Spellar? Ah, there he is. Let’s hear the fella.

T10. [907342] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope the Home Secretary will answer this question, because the reality is that in the West Midlands police area, crime is escalating and the overstretched, understaffed police are feeling deeply frustrated as the criminals and the gangs take control of the streets, especially at night. When is he going to stop the rot and give the backing and the resources to our police out there on the street every day?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman will know that West Midlands police had an increase of almost £10 million this year. However, it is always worth listening to local forces. I am happy to meet west midlands MPs, as I have done in the past, and to listen more.
Ways and Means

Financial Statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I remind hon. Members that copies of the Budget resolutions will be available in the Vote Office at the end of the Chancellor’s speech. I also remind hon. Members that it is not the norm to intervene on the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Leader of the Opposition.

3.31 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Today, I present to the House a Budget for Britain’s future: a Budget that shows the perseverance of the British people finally paying off; a Budget for hard-working families who live their lives far from this place and care little for the twists and turns of Westminster politics. People who get up early every morning, who open up factories, shops, and building sites, drop their kids off at school, check on elderly relatives and neighbours—the strivers, the grafters and the carers who are the backbone of our communities and our economy. People who ask only of Government that we protect the jobs that put food on their table; that we deliver the public services their families rely on; and that we do it efficiently, minimising the amount of tax we need to take from their hard-earned wages. People who Conservative Members are proud to represent. So I say to them today: this Budget is unashamedly for you.

The British people put their faith in us to do the job, and today we repay that trust with a Budget that paves the way for a brighter future. Let me be clear why. The tough decisions of the past eight years were not driven by ideology—/[Interuption./] They were not driven by ideology—they were driven by necessity and by Labour’s failure in government which led to our deficit soaring to a post-war record and our economy suffering the deepest recession since the second world war. That was our inheritance and, as ever, we did what needed to be done.

Now we have reached a defining moment on this long, hard journey, opening a new chapter in our country’s economic history where we can look confidently to the future and set our course for where this remarkable country will go next. Because today, I can report to the House: a Budget that shows the perseverance of the British people in clearing up the aftermath of Labour’s great recession. Because for all Labour’s carping and relentless negativity, talking Britain down at every opportunity, we the British people have a record to be proud of: eight straight years of economic growth; over 3.3 million more people in jobs; higher employment and lower unemployment in every region and every nation of the United Kingdom; wages growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade; income inequality lower now than at any time under the last Labour Government; an economy back on its feet again; an economy working not for the few, and not even for the many—an economy working for everyone.

We are at a pivotal moment in our EU negotiations, and the stakes could not be higher. Get it right, and we will not only protect Britain’s jobs, businesses and prosperity, but harvest a double “deal dividend”: a boost from the end of uncertainty, and a boost from releasing some of the fiscal headroom that I am holding in reserve at the moment. We are confident that we will secure a deal which delivers that dividend—confident, but not complacent. So we will continue to plan for all eventualities, and I will do so at this Budget with a three-pronged approach.

First, I have already allocated £2.2 billion to Departments for Brexit preparations, and in the autumn Budget last year I set aside a further £1.5 billion to be allocated for 2019-20. Today I am increasing that sum to £2 billion, and in the coming weeks the Chief Secretary will announce allocations to individual Departments.

Secondly, I shall today maintain the headroom to my fiscal rules broadly as set out in the spring statement, retaining firepower to intervene if the economy needs more support in the coming months. Thirdly, as I have been clear since moving to an autumn Budget, if the economic or fiscal outlook changes materially in-year, I will take whatever action is appropriate, if necessary upgrading the spring statement to a full fiscal event. The House can be confident that we are working for the best outcome for Britain and preparing for every eventuality.

I shall first report to the House on the economic forecasts of the independent Office for Budget Responsibility, and I thank Robert Chote and his team, once again, for their excellent work. The OBR expects growth to be resilient across the forecast period, improving next year from the 1.3% forecast at the spring statement to 1.6%; then 1.4% in 2020 and 2021; 1.5% in 2022; and 1.6% in 2023.

This Government have prioritised getting people into work because the best way to help people is to provide them with the stability of a pay packet every month. Since 2010, over 5 million more people are in work, and today the OBR confirms Britain’s “jobs miracle” is set to continue—revising up participation in the labour market, revising down the country’s equilibrium
unemployment rate and predicting 800,000 more jobs by 2023. By my calculation, that is over 4.2 million net new jobs since 2010, making the shadow Chancellor’s prediction of 1.2 million jobs lost out by just the tiniest margin of 5.4 million people—roughly the population of Scotland.

But now we need to focus on pay, and with the proportion of low-paid jobs at its lowest since 1997, with regular pay growth at 3.1%—its strongest in almost a decade—and inflation forecast to average 2% next year, the OBR is forecasting sustained real wage growth in each of the next five years, which is a far cry from the dismal picture that the Leader of the Opposition is so desperate to paint every Wednesday.

I turn now to the fiscal forecast. We inherited the highest budget deficit in our peacetime history, but after eight years the hard work of the British people is paying off, and we will not squander their efforts. Today’s forecast, taking into account all announcements made since the spring statement, including measures I shall announce today, shows the deficit down from almost 10% under Labour to less than 1.4% next year under this Conservative Government, and falling to just 0.8% by 2023-24. Borrowing this year will be £11.6 billion lower than forecast at the spring statement—just 1.2% of GDP—and is then set to fall from £31.8 billion in 2019-20 to £26.7 billion in 2020-21, £23.8 billion in 2021-22, £20.8 billion in 2022-23 and £19.8 billion in 2023-24, its lowest level in over 20 years.

So we meet our structural borrowing target three years early and deliver borrowing of just 1.3% of GDP in 2020-21, maintaining £15.4 billion headroom against our 2% fiscal rules target. We are no longer borrowing at all to finance current spending, and today the OBR confirms that our national debt peaked in 2016-17 at 85.2% of GDP, and then falls in every year of the forecast from 83.7% this year to 74.1% in 2023-24. That is lower in every year than forecast at the spring statement, and it means that we meet our target to get debt falling three years early: a turning point in our nation’s recovery from Labour’s great recession—both our fiscal rules met, both of them three years early—so Fiscal Phil says, “Fiscal Rules OK”.

While we are working to get Britain’s debt down, to end the nightmare of wasting over £50 billion a year on interest, the party opposite would do the opposite. Labour’s plans would increase tax and borrowing by £1,000 billion, taking our debt to GDP ratio soaring to well over 100% of GDP—a reckless and irresponsible policy from a reckless and irresponsible party.

I have always been clear: sound public finances are essential, but they are not an end in themselves. So since I have been Chancellor I have taken a balanced approach, putting an additional £60 billion into our public services and investment in our future, cutting tax for 31 million people, and all the while reducing borrowing and getting our national debt falling. Now, we must do more, and thanks to the hard work of the British people, in this Budget we can do more.

I said at the spring statement that our careful management of the public finances was beginning to pay off, and that if the improvement we saw then continued, I would be able to provide more support to our public services on a sustainable basis. Today, the OBR confirms a significant improvement in our public finances—an upgrade that underscores the hard work of the British people and this Government’s stewardship of the economy since 2010, and means that I can deliver on the promise I made in the spring, setting out a new path for public spending, and a clear plan for the British people of the fruits of their hard work.

Next year, we will conduct a full spending review, setting our priorities for public spending within a sustainable funding envelope, deciding on the right balance between investing in Britain’s future and current consumption of public services. Today, I have set out an indicative five-year path for departmental resource spending—RDEL, as it is known to aficionados of public finance. To give context, in spending review 2010, average annual real growth was minus 3%; in spending review 2015, it was minus 1.3%; from next year, average annual real growth will be plus 1.2%—but that is not the limit of my ambition. When our EU negotiations deliver a deal, as I am confident they will, I expect that the deal dividend will allow us to provide further funding for the spending review. The hard work of the British people is paying off; austerity is coming to an end.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know better than most that every Chancellor likes to have a rabbit or two in his hat as he approaches a Budget, but this year, some of my star bunnies appear to have escaped just a little bit early. In June, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced the single largest cash commitment to our public services ever made by a peacetime Government—an £8.4 billion five-year deal for our precious NHS, half as much again as the increase and clear offer the NHS at the last election. Let me be clear: we are delivering this historic £20.5 billion real-terms increase for the NHS in full over the next five years. So in a very important sense, we made our big choice for this Budget four months before it was delivered.

This was the right decision. Our NHS is the No. 1 priority of the British people, and as we approached the 70th anniversary of its foundation, they had a right to know the scale of our commitment to it. But the British people also care that money invested in the NHS goes to the frontline and to improvements in services, so we did not just hand over money; we agreed that the NHS would produce a 10-year plan, setting out how the service will reform, how waste will be reduced, and exactly what the British people can expect to get for their money.

That plan will be published shortly, but I shall give the House a sneak preview today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] I, too, can poach a rabbit every now and then.

There are many pressing demands on additional NHS funding, but few more pressing than the needs of those who suffer from mental illness. Today, I can announce that the NHS 10-year plan will include: a new mental health crisis service with comprehensive mental health support available in every major A&E; children and young peoples’ crisis teams in every part of the country; more mental health ambulances; more “safe havens” in the community; and a 24-hour mental health crisis hotline. These new services will ensure that people suffering from a crisis, young or old, can get the help they need, ending the stigma that has forced too many to suffer in silence and ending the tragedy of too many lives lost to suicide. We made an extraordinary commitment to funding our NHS, a precious institution that has been nurtured for most of its life by Conservative Governments.
Departmental spending allocations will be settled at the spending review next year. However, there are a small number of areas where I will provide further support now in order to deliver necessary certainty for forward planning. Local government has made a significant contribution to repairing the public finances and this Budget ensures local councils have more resources to deliver high-quality public services. We are giving councils greater control over the money they raise: through the adult social care precept; through our plans for increased business rate retention from 2020; and by removing the housing revenue account cap, so that councils can help to build the homes this country needs.

We will shortly publish our Green Paper on the future of social care, setting out the choices, some of them difficult, for making our social care system sustainable into the future. But I recognise the immediate pressures local authorities face in respect of social care. So today, building on the £240 million for social care winter pressures announced earlier this month, I will make available a further £650 million of grant funding for English authorities for 2019-20, and an additional £45 million for the disabled facilities grant in England in 2018-19. We will invest a further £84 million over the next five years to expand our successful children’s social care programmes to 20 further councils with high or rising numbers of children in care, allowing councils to improve services for older people, for people with disabilities and for children in care now, while longer-term funding decisions will be made at the spending review.

The UK spends more on defence than any NATO member except the US, but over the past year we have had stark reminders of the scale, scope and complexity of the threats we face. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is working with the Cabinet Office and the Treasury to conduct a review into the modernisation of our armed forces in response to the evolving threat, which will form the basis for a comprehensive consideration of defence spending next year. As a former Defence Secretary myself, I understand the immediate pressures our armed forces are facing, so I will today provide an additional £1 billion to the Ministry of Defence to cover the remainder of this year and next to boost our cyber capabilities and our anti-submarine warfare capacity, and to maintain the pace of the Dreadnought programme to ensure continuous at-sea deterrence, a deterrent that allows us to sleep easy in our beds, but one that the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor have spent their political lifetimes campaigning to abolish. Nobody should be in any doubt that those of us on the Government Benches are proud of our armed forces and we will always back them with the investment they need to keep this country safe.

It is not only our armed forces who keep us safe. Our counter-terrorism police play a vital role in defending Britain against the evolving threats we face. We committed in 2015 to spend 30% more on counter-terrorism capabilities over the current spending review period. And today I commit an additional £160 million of CT police funding for 2019-20 to protect CT police numbers in 2019-20 and to allow future CT police funding to be considered in the round at the spending review.

I recognise that policing more generally is under pressure from the changing nature of crime. I also recognise the representations made on this by many colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), and I can tell the House today that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will review police spending power and further options for reform when he presents the provisional police funding settlement in December.

As I have already set out, due to the hard work of the British people, public borrowing this year is coming in substantially below forecast. This allows us to provide additional support for public services in the spending review and contributes to the significant reduction in forecast debt this year. But I also want to use this good news to give a little bit back, where it can be put to good use, in this financial year.

This year marks a century since the end of the first world war. And as we remember our fallen servicemen and women whose sacrifice ensured the freedom we enjoy today, many projects are raising money for veterans’ charities from sales of commemorative items on which VAT is charged. We cannot waive the VAT due on these sales, but we can make a donation with the VAT we will receive, and I commit today that the Treasury will mark the centenary of the armistice by making a donation of £10 million to the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to support veterans with mental health needs.

Many of our nation’s village halls were built to commemorate the sacrifice of world war one, and many of them are being refurbished to commemorate the centenary. So I will also provide funding for grants equivalent to the VAT chargeable on such refurbishment projects. And as our focus moves from the anniversaries of the first world war to the second, I will also provide £1.7 million for educational programmes in schools to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camps, ensuring that the next generation hears the stories of those who survived the holocaust and of the British soldiers who liberated them, because as the terrible events in Pittsburgh this weekend remind us, the battle against antisemitism did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Across the length and breadth of England, our air ambulance services work tirelessly to get those with life-threatening illnesses and injuries quickly to the expert medical care they need. Funded entirely by philanthropy, they do a fantastic job, and today I am making £10 million of funding available to help them to go on doing so.

We are investing record amounts in our schools and that investment is paying off, with 86% of schools now rated good or outstanding, compared with 68% in 2010. But I recognise that school budgets often do not stretch to that extra bit of kit that would make such a difference. So today I am announcing a £400 million in-year bonus to help our schools buy the little extras they need—a one-off capital payment directly to schools, averaging £10,000 per primary school and £50,000 per secondary school.

I have one final in-year measure to announce: every Member of Parliament will testify that potholes are high on the public’s list of concerns. So as autumn takes hold, I am making an additional £420 million available immediately to local highway authorities to tackle potholes, bridge repairs and other minor works in this financial year.

But if we want sustainable world-class public services and rising living standards, we must make the serious long-term reforms our economy needs to tackle the productivity challenge, to prepare our nation for the
I believe passionately in this agenda, but even I would admit that at the last two Budgets I might have given the House just a little more detailed information on productivity and technological innovation than it strictly needed, so this time I will leave it to the Budget Red Book to set out more detail of the many measures we needed, so this time I will leave it to the Budget Red Book to set out more detail of the many measures we will take today. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"] Sensing the disappointment of my colleagues, I will just mention that the list in the Budget Red Book includes our commitment to technology, with £1.6 billion of new investments to support our modern industrial strategy, ranging from nuclear fusion to quantum computing; £150 million for fellowships to attract the brightest talent to these shores from around the world so that our scientific research can continue to lead the world; and our commitment to infrastructure, including our expanding of the national productivity investment fund once again to over £38 billion by 2023-24, so that over the next five years total public investment will grow by 30% to its highest sustained level in 40 years and will on average be an astonishing £460 million a week higher, in real terms, than under the last Labour Government. This is a Conservative Government investing in the roads, the railways, the research and the digital infrastructure that will power this country in the 21st century.

Half of the UK’s £600 billion infrastructure pipeline will be built and financed by the private sector. In financing public infrastructure, I remain committed to the use of public-private partnership where it delivers value for the taxpayer and genuinely transfers risk to the private sector, but there is compelling evidence that the private finance initiative does neither. The shadow Chancellor, of course, rages against PFI at every opportunity yet curiously forgets to mention that nearly 90% of those contracts were agreed by the last Labour Government. That has left the nation with a bill of more than £200 billion to pay off and would be the most potent symbol of the economic mismanagement of the last Labour Government, if only Gordon Brown hadn’t sold the gold.

Labour’s policy is to terminate all these contracts, triggering the ruinous penalty clauses that the Labour Government themselves agreed to in the first place and adding tens of billions more to an already enormous bill. It is a classic Labour solution: pouring good money after bad. I will not do that—we will honour existing contracts—but the days of the public sector being a pushover must end. We will establish a centre of excellence to actively manage these contracts in the taxpayers’ interest, starting in the health sector, but we will go further.

I have never signed off a PFI contract as Chancellor, and I can confirm today that I never will. I can announce that the Government will abolish the use of PFI and PF2 for future projects, putting another legacy of Labour behind us.

We are investing in our nation’s infrastructure and backing the technologies of the future, but we know that the real engine of growth is enterprise. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) lists “fermenting the overthrow of capitalism” as his pastime.

Mine is “reinvigorating capitalism for the digital age”, because I want Britain to be one of the great winners of the technological revolution. On this side of the House, we will always back enterprise and the market economy that underpins it, because we know that it is the only way to deliver the high-wage, high-skill economy of the future.

As we finalise our departure from the EU and deliver a deal that secures Britain’s future trade, we must unleash the investment that will drive our future prosperity. So today I can announce a package of measures to stimulate business investment and send a message loud and clear to the rest of the world: Britain is open for business. I am increasing the annual investment allowance from £200,000 to £1 million for two years, delivering on a long-standing ask of the British Chambers of Commerce; I am providing a targeted relief for the cost of acquiring intellectual property-rich businesses; and I am introducing a permanent tax relief for new non-residential structures and buildings, partly funded by an adjustment in the special writing-down rate for long-life assets from 8% to 6% to better align the tax and accounting treatment of these assets.

To support British exports, we will increase UK Export Finance’s direct lending facility by up to £2 billion. We will open the use of e-passport gates at Heathrow and other airports, currently only available to European economic area nationals, to include visitors from the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Japan. We will provide an additional £300 million of funding for the British Business Bank to replace access to the European investment fund, if needed. We will back another 10,000 entrepreneurs by extending start-up loans funding to 2021. Following representations from the Federation of Small Businesses, I am extending the new enterprise allowance, providing mentoring and support for benefit claimants to get their business ideas off the ground.

With thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), we are working with the Financial Conduct Authority on expanding access to the Financial Ombudsman Service for larger small and medium-sized enterprises. As well as backing businesses to invest and grow, we will make sure that British workers are equipped with the skills that they need to thrive and prosper. We have introduced a new system of T-level vocational training, we have put the first £100 million into the new national retraining scheme, and, through the apprenticeship levy, we are delivering 3 million high-quality apprenticeships in this Parliament. But that system is paid for by employers, and it has to work for employers. So today, in addition to the flexibilities that I announced earlier this month, I can announce...
that for smaller firms taking on apprentices we will halve the amount that they must contribute from 10% to 5%. In total, this is a £695 million package to support apprenticeships.

As our economy evolves in the digital age, so too must our tax system, to ensure that it remains fair and robust against abuse, and raises the revenues that we need to fund our public services. The employment allowance was introduced to incentivise businesses to take on employees, but at a flat rate of £3,000 per employer, it does not provide any real incentive for larger employers. So from April 2020, we will target it at small and medium businesses with an employer’s national insurance bill of less than £100,000 a year. We will also bring the treatment of capital losses for the largest companies into line with that of income losses.

We recommit ourselves today to keeping family homes out of capital gains tax, but some aspects of private residence relief extend beyond that objective, and provide relief for people who are not using the home as their main residence. So from April 2020, we will set letting relief to properties where the owner is in shared occupancy with the tenant, and reduce the final period exemption from 18 months to nine months.

I have received representations that I should abolish entrepreneur’s relief and put the savings towards funding our NHS commitments, but I do not believe we can have sustainable public services unless we have a dynamic economy, and encouraging entrepreneurs must be at the heart of any strategy for a dynamic economy, so I will retain entrepreneur’s relief, but to ensure it is going to genuine entrepreneurs, I will extend the minimum qualifying period from 12 months to two years.

In the period since the last Budget, we have explored all avenues to address the cliff-edge effect of VAT registration, but our options are restricted by EU law. We will continue to work on this issue as our future VAT regime becomes clear over the years ahead, and in the meantime, to give small businesses certainty and in response to representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), the Federation of Small Businesses and others, I will leave the threshold unchanged for a further two years.

The off-payroll working rules, known as IR35, are designed to ensure fairness so that individuals working side by side in a similar role for the same employer pay the same employment taxes. Last year, we changed the way these rules are enforced in the public sector, but widespread non-compliance also exists in the private sector, so following our consultation, we will now apply the same changes to private sector organisations as well. But after listening carefully to representations made—including many from right hon. and hon. Friends—during the consultation, we will delay these changes until April 2020, and we will only apply them to large and medium-sized businesses.

There is one standout example of where the rules of the game must evolve now if they are to keep up with the emerging digital economy. Digital platforms delivering search engines, social media and online marketplaces have changed our lives, our society and our economy, mostly for the better, but they also pose a real challenge for the sustainability and fairness of our tax system. The rules have simply not kept pace with changing business models, and it is clearly not sustainable or fair that digital platform businesses can generate substantial value in the UK without paying tax here in respect of that business. The UK has been leading attempts to deliver international corporate tax reform for the digital age. A new global agreement is the best long-term solution, but progress is painfully slow. We cannot simply talk forever, so we will now introduce—at interruption. We will now introduce a UK digital services tax. This will be a narrowly targeted tax on the UK-generated revenues of specific digital platform business models. It will be carefully designed to ensure it is established tech giants, rather than our tech start-ups, that shoulder the burden of this new tax.

It is important that I emphasise that this is not an online sales tax on goods ordered over the internet; such a tax would fall on consumers of those goods, and that is not our intention. The digital services tax will only be paid by companies that are profitable and that generate at least £500 million a year in global revenues in the business lines in scope. We will consult on the detail to make sure we get it right and to ensure that the UK continues to be the best place in the world to start and scale-up a tech business. The tax will come into effect in April 2020 and is expected to raise over £400 million a year.

In the meantime, we will continue to work at the OECD and G20 to seek a globally agreed solution, and if one emerges, we will consider adopting it in place of the UK digital services tax, but this step shows that we are serious about this reform, because it is only right that these global giants with profitable businesses in the UK pay their fair share towards supporting our public services. I am already looking forward to my call from the former leader of the Liberal Democrats.

We are updating the rules of the game, but we must also make sure people play by the rules. And today we can announce the end of the PATAE restriction for the small and medium-sized companies scheme. Labour talk tough on tax avoidance and evasion. We take action.

Investing in our infrastructure, backing the technologies of the future, supporting British businesses, and updating our tax system for the digital age—that is how we will deliver the high-wage, high-skill economy of the future. But we must also recognise that technological change will bring challenges as well as opportunities, and there is one part of our economy that is currently confronting that challenge in spades: our high streets. Embedded in the fabric of our great cities, towns and villages, the high street lies at the heart of many communities, and it is under pressure as never before as Britain adopts online shopping with greater alacrity than any other large
economy. So if Britain’s high streets are to remain at the centre of our community life, they will need to adapt. Today, we support them to do so, responding to calls from across this House, especially from my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and my hon. Friends the Members for Southport (Damien Moore) and for Croydon South (Chris Philp).

We will provide £675 million of co-funding to create a future high streets fund to support councils to draw up formal plans for the transformation of their high streets, to invest in the improvements they need and to facilitate redevelopment of under-used retail and commercial areas into residential, at one and the same time helping with the housing challenge and delivering much-needed footfall to high street businesses. We will consult on how modernisation of the use classes order and compulsory purchase order regime can help to facilitate the transformation of the high street.

The change our high streets face is irreversible and it will take them time to adapt to it, but I know that many small retail businesses are struggling to cope with the high fixed costs of business rates. Since 2016, we have introduced business rates relief measures worth £12 billion, and many of these reliefs will have benefited high street businesses, but today I can go further. At the next revaluation, in 2021, rateable values will adjust to reflect changes in rental values, but I want to help retail businesses now. So for the next two years, up to that revaluation, for all retailers in England with a rateable value of £51,000 or less, I will cut their business rates bill by a third. That is an annual saving of up to £8,000 for up to 90% of all independent shops, pubs, restaurants and cafés. I will also extend the £1,500 local newspaper discount for a further year. Whatever the national press says, I have been assured of a warm welcome for my Budget from the *Royston Crow* and The Keswick Reminder.

Local authorities have long been able to provide discretionary business rates relief to other bodies, but not to themselves. And so following representations from my hon. Friends the Members for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), I am pleased to announce a new mandatory business rates relief for public lavatories, so that local authorities can, at last, relieve themselves. For the convenience of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, and without wishing to get unduly bogged down in the subject, this relief—

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Toilet humour.

Mr Hammond: Well, at least I am demonstrating that we are all British. This relief will extend to any such facilities made available for public use, whether publicly or privately owned. I can honestly say that that is virtually the only announcement in this Budget that has not leaked. [Hon. Members: “More!”]

We cannot resolve the productivity challenge or deliver the high standards of living that the British people deserve without fixing our housing market. In last year’s Budget, I launched a five-year, £44 billion housing programme to deliver the biggest increase in housing supply since 1970, and I abolished stamp duty for first-time buyers on properties up to £300,000. Some 121,500 first-time buyers have already benefited from our new relief, and the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high. Today, I am extending that relief to all first-time buyers of shared ownership properties valued up to £500,000, and I will make the relief retrospective so that any first-time buyer who has made such a purchase since the previous Budget will benefit.

But we have more to do, so I can announce today a further £500 million for the housing infrastructure fund to unlock a further 650,000 homes, the next wave of strategic partnerships with nine housing associations, which will deliver 13,000 homes across England, and up to £1 billion of British Business Bank guarantees to support the revival of SME housebuilders. We are consulting on simplification of the process for conversion of commercial property into new homes, and because we want to see parishes and neighbourhoods enabling more homes for sale to local people to buy at prices they can afford, we are providing funding to empower up to 500 neighbourhoods to allocate or permission land for housing through the neighbourhood planning system for sale at a discount to local people in perpetuity.

I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for his review of build-out rates, published today. He concludes that the large housebuilders are not engaged in systematic speculative land banking—[Interruption.] Perhaps Opposition Members would like to read the report. My right hon. Friend makes several recommendations for reform of the planning system in respect of large strategic housing sites, and we will respond to his report in full in the new year.

Meeting the productivity challenge means tapping the potential of every region and nation. Our devolution agenda is giving power back to the people, and today we go further to fire up the northern powerhouse, fuel the midlands engine and back our regions across the UK. We are increasing the transforming cities fund to £2.4 billion and providing an additional £90 million to trial new models of smart transport, including on-demand buses—I think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that is what we used to call taxis in our day. We are launching a competition for proposals for business-led development corporations. We are funding 10 university enterprise zones. There is £115 million for digital catapults in the north-east, Northern Ireland and the south-east and for the medicines discovery catapult in Alderley, £70 million to develop the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre near Loughborough, £37 million of additional development funding for northern powerhouse rail, and £10 million for a new pilot in Manchester to support the self-employed to acquire new skills. We are backing a new special economic area in south Tees, and we are providing £20 million to further develop the plan for the critical central section of east-west rail between Oxford and Cambridge. And here, in our capital, we support the delivery of a further 19,000 homes by improving the docklands light railway with housing infrastructure fund money.

The decisions announced in this Budget mean, in 2020-21, an additional £950 million for the Scottish Government, £550 million for the Welsh Government and £320 million for a Northern Ireland Executive. Obviously, there are much larger sums to come, as we move ahead over the spending review period with our NHS funding change.

I can also announce funding for further city and growth deals, including £150 million for Tay Cities, £350 million for Belfast and £120 million for North
Wales, while negotiations progress with Ayrshire, Mid Wales and Borderlands, and will begin with Moray, Derry/Londonderry and Strabane as well.

I was pleased to be able to respond to a joint request from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) to provide the city with £2 million of help towards the recovery of the city centre following the fire at the iconic Bank Buildings, and we are also moving forward with schools projects in Northern Ireland worth £300 million to increase the provision of shared and integrated cross-community education. And we have agreed to the establishment of a working group to progress plans for short-haul air passenger duty devolution.

To continue to support Scotland’s oil and gas industry, we will maintain headline tax rates at their current level and launch a call for evidence on our plan to make Scotland a global hub for decommissioning. Finally, to support our vital fishing industry as we leave the EU, we will invest £12 million over the next three years in cutting-edge fisheries technology and safety measures.

A Conservative Government delivering for all our proud nations and for all our English regions, driving growth and prosperity across our United Kingdom.

We are driven by a determination to ensure that the next generation will be more prosperous than ours, but we cannot secure our children’s future unless we secure our planet’s future. So at this Budget I take further action with a package of measures, set out in the Red Book, to ensure that we leave our environment in a better state than we inherited it.

There is one particular measure I want to mention. The shadow Chancellor’s recent accident has reminded us all of how dangerous abandoned waste can be, so I will provide £10 million to deal with abandoned waste sites, although I cannot guarantee to the House that £10 million is going to be enough to stop him falling flat on his face in the future.

I also said at the spring statement that we must become a world leader in tackling the scourge of plastic littering our planet and our oceans. Billions of disposable plastic drinks cups, cartons, bags and other items are used every year in Britain—convenient for consumers, but deadly for our wildlife and our oceans. Where we cannot achieve reuse, we are determined to increase recycling, so we will introduce a new tax on the manufacture and import of plastic packaging which contains less than 30% recycled plastic, transforming the economics of sustainable packaging. We will consult on the detail and implementation timetable.

I have also looked carefully at the case for introducing a levy on the production of disposable plastic cups—not just for coffee, but for all types of beverage—and I have concluded that a tax in isolation would not, at this point, deliver a decisive shift from disposable to reusable cups across all beverage types. I will monitor carefully the effectiveness of the action which the takeaway drinks industry is already taking to reduce single-use plastics, and I will return to this issue if sufficient progress is not made. In parallel, my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary will look to address this issue through the reform of the packaging producer responsibility scheme.

Working across government, this ambitious package reflects our determination to lead the world in the crusade to rid the oceans and the environment of plastic waste.

It is only by dealing with our debts and tackling the long-term challenges our country faces that we can sustainably raise wages and living standards. But I recognise that many people are feeling pressure on their household budgets now, and because the hard work of the British people is paying off. I am pleased to be able to announce today a series of measures to help families across Britain with the cost of living.

Turning first to duties, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already announced, we will freeze fuel duties for the ninth successive year, bringing the total saving to the average car driver to over £1,000 and to the average van driver to over £2,500. The tobacco duty escalator will continue to rise at inflation plus 2%. I have received numerous representations from my right hon. and hon. Friends on one particular subject, and in response I will be freezing beer and cider duty for the next year, keeping the cost of beer down for patrons of the great British pub. And in response to the concerted lobbying of my Scottish Conservative colleagues, I will also freeze duty on spirits, so that we can all afford to raise a wee dram to Ruth Davidson on the arrival of baby Finn, saving 2p on a pint of beer, 1p on a pint of cider and 30p on a bottle of Scotch or gin compared with the inflation assumption in the OBR forecast, while proceeding with the usual RPI increases on wine.

As promised at the autumn Budget 2017, so-called “white ciders” will be taxed at a new higher rate. From October next year, I can confirm that we will increase remote gaming duty on online games of chance to 21%, in order to fund the loss of revenue as we reduce FOBT—fixed odds betting terminals—stakes to £2.

From April 2020, APD—air passenger duty—will be indexed in line with inflation, but there will be no change in the duty rate for short-haul flights. The new 26-30 railcard, which I announced at Budget last year, will be available across the network by the end of the year, saving up to 4.4 million young people one third off their fares, and we launch a package of measures on affordable credit and support for credit unions, which is set out in detail in the Red Book.

The switch to universal credit is a long overdue and necessary reform. It replaces the broken system left by the last Labour Government, a system that trapped millions on out-of-work benefits for nearly a decade. This is not just a welfare measure; it is a major structural reform to our economy that will help to drive growth and employment in the years ahead, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), without whose tenacity universal credit would never have seen the light. However, I recognise the genuine concerns among many right hon. and hon. Friends about two issues, the first of which is the implementation of this programme. It is an enormous undertaking and we have always been clear we want the migration process to be as smooth as possible. I have already delivered nearly £3.5 billion to help with the transition, including a £1.5 billion package of support at last year’s Budget. Today I can go further, with a package of measures worth £1 billion over five years—[Interruption.] What a surprise. What a surprising response from the Opposition Front-Bench team. It is a
Let me reassure the House that, unlike the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), my idea of ending austerity does not involve increasing people’s tax bills. I did not come into politics to put taxes up, and the improvement that we have delivered in the public finances means that, based on the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecast published today, I do not need to do so. I can therefore confirm today that I will meet our manifesto commitments for April 2020 to raise the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate threshold to £50,000, before indexing both in line with inflation from 2021 to 2022. But our careful management of the economy allows me to go further, so I will raise both the personal allowance and the higher rate threshold to these levels from April 2019, delivering our manifesto commitments one year early. A tax cut for 32 million people, £130 in the pocket of a typical basic rate taxpayer, meaning that, since 2015, we have taken 1.7 million people out of tax altogether and nearly 1 million people out of higher rate tax. As a result of the announcements that I have made today, a single parent, receiving universal credit and working 25 hours a week on the national living wage will benefit by £890 next year—the hard work of the British people paying off in hard cash in their pockets.

We have turned an important corner and now we must pull together to build the bright, prosperous future that is within Britain’s grasp if we choose to seize it—embracing change, not hiding from it, building on the inherent strength of the British economy and the indomitable spirit of the British people.

Under this Conservative Government, austerity is coming to an end, but discipline will remain. [Interruption.] Austerity is coming to an end, but discipline will remain. That is the clear dividing line in British politics today: between a Conservative Government delivering on the British people’s priorities, supporting our public services, investing in Britain’s future, keeping taxes low and getting our debt down; or the Corbyn party, whose idea of ending austerity is to raise taxes to their highest level in peacetime history, which would send our debt soaring, squander the hard-won achievements of the past eight years and take this country back to square one. We are at a turning point in our history and we must resolve to go forwards, not backwards, and work together to build a Britain that we can all be proud of. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deput y Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The Question is that, pursuant to section 5 of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, provisional statutory effects shall be given to the following motions: (a) stamp duty reserve tax (listed securities and connected persons) (motion No. 49); (b) tobacco products rates—[Interruption.] Order. May I just say to hon. Members that they need to listen to what is going to affect their constituents? I will say it once again: hon. Members may be interested in what affects their constituents—I certainly am—but
we will not know what affects them and what does not until I can complete the motion. Let us complete the motion—I do not need any help from those on the Back Benches.

PROVISIONAL COLLECTION OF TAXES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 51(2))

That, pursuant to section 5 of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, provisional statutory effect shall be given to the following motions:—

(a) Stamp duty reserve tax (listed securities and connected persons) (Motion No. 49);
(b) Tobacco products duty (rates) (Motion No. 57).—
(Mr Philip Hammond.)
Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I now call upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer to move the motion entitled “Income tax (charge)”. It is on this motion that the debate will take place today and on succeeding days. The Questions on this motion and on the remaining motions will be put at the end of the Budget debate on Thursday 1 November.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): The reality is that, whatever the Chancellor claims today, austerity is not over. Far from building a strong economy, eight years of austerity has damaged our economy, delayed and weakened the recovery, and endlessly postponed fixing the deficit. Unnecessary austerity has caused real hardship to millions of our fellow citizens, held down living standards for the majority and failed on its own terms. People have had enough—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer; I expect to hear the Leader of the Opposition. To those who may have sat where they think I cannot see them, yes I can, and I do not want to hear any more. I want to hear the Leader of the Opposition in the same way that your constituents do.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister pledged that austerity is over. This is a broken-promise Budget. What we have heard today are half-measures and quick fixes, while austerity grinds on. Far from people’s hard work and sacrifices having paid off, as the Chancellor claims, this Government have frittered them away in ideological tax cuts to the richest in our society. This Budget will not undo the damage done by eight years of austerity and does not begin to measure up to the scale of the job that needs to be done to rebuild Britain.

The Government claim that austerity has worked, so now they can end it, but that is absolutely the opposite of the truth. Austerity needs to end because it has failed. Just two years ago, the Chancellor forecast growth of 2.1% next year and the year after. Today he boasts that he has created robust economic growth, but the forecasts have been dropped to just 1.6% next year and 1.4% the year after. Economic growth in the first half of this year was the slowest since 2011, the last year that we had the lowest growth of any major economy. This is not a strong economy but a weak one, with chronically low investment, low wages and low productivity, and the uncertainty caused by this Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit is making things even worse. The warnings come—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Bowie, Mr Philp, I expect better. You are very obviously right in my sight, so I suggest that you go quietly out of the Chamber if you cannot behave.

Jeremy Corbyn: The warnings come from across the economy: the car industry; farming and food; road haulage. UK manufacturing is currently in recession. So much for the much-vaunted “march of the makers”.

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2019-20.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.—(Mr Philip Hammond.)

4.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): The reality is that, whatever the Chancellor claims today, austerity is not over. Far from building a strong economy, eight years of austerity has damaged our economy, delayed and weakened the recovery, and endlessly postponed fixing the deficit. Unnecessary austerity has caused real hardship to millions of our fellow citizens, held down living standards for the majority and failed on its own terms. People have had enough—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer; I expect to hear the Leader of the Opposition. To those who may have sat where they think I cannot see them, yes I can, and I do not want to hear any more. I want to hear the Leader of the Opposition in the same way that your constituents do.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister pledged that austerity is over. This is a broken-promise Budget. What we have heard today are half-measures and quick fixes, while austerity grinds on. Far from people’s hard work and sacrifices having paid off, as the Chancellor claims, this Government have frittered them away in ideological tax cuts to the richest in our society. This Budget will not undo the damage done by eight years of austerity and does not begin to measure up to the scale of the job that needs to be done to rebuild Britain.

The Government claim that austerity has worked, so now they can end it, but that is absolutely the opposite of the truth. Austerity needs to end because it has failed. Just two years ago, the Chancellor forecast growth of 2.1% next year and the year after. Today he boasts that he has created robust economic growth, but the forecasts have been dropped to just 1.6% next year and 1.4% the year after. Economic growth in the first half of this year was the slowest since 2011, the last year that we had the lowest growth of any major economy. This is not a strong economy but a weak one, with chronically low investment, low wages and low productivity, and the uncertainty caused by this Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit is making things even worse. The warnings come—[Interruption.]

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Financial Statement 29 OCTOBER 2018
The Government said that austerity would mean that the deficit would close by 2015. Today the Chancellor has confirmed that it will still be there nine years later, in 2024. Even now, great chunks of the deficit have simply been palmed off to others, not eradicated—moved into the accounts of NHS trusts; shuffled on to the books of local councils that have collapsed, with many more on the brink; and most worryingly, and frighteningly for many people, loaded on to the very fast-rising levels of personal and household debt.

For too long, the Conservatives have peddled the myth that the last Labour Government crashed the economy by overspending on public services—as if investing to bring health spending up to European levels, as the last Labour Government did, had caused the global financial crash. Labour Members believe that spending on public services is an investment that benefits the health of our people and the economy of our country. This morning the Health Secretary said that it would take a generation to achieve parity of esteem of mental health and refused to say whether the money was ring-fenced—and that money is only half of what leading mental health experts say is necessary.

But the impact of austerity on our people’s health is about more than NHS funding. Improvements in life expectancy are stalling for the first time in modern history, and in the poorest areas of our country life expectancy is actually falling and child mortality is rising. The national health service—our precious national health service—is a thermometer of the wellbeing of our society. But the illness is austerity: cuts to social care, failure to invest in housing, and slashing of real social security. It has one inevitable consequence: people’s health has got worse and demands on the national health service have increased, with 1.4 million elderly people not getting the care they need. Tory cuts have taken £7 billion—£7 billion—from social care budgets.

Today’s announcement is a drop in the ocean both for adult and child social care. At this time of rising demand, nurse numbers are falling, GP numbers are falling, health visitor numbers are falling, and there are 10,000 vacancies for doctors in our national health service.

Under the last Labour Government, NHS budgets averaged an increase of 6% a year. That has been slashed to just 1.4% under this Government. The Health Foundation says that the Government’s much-heralded extra money for the national health service is “simply not enough”, while the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that funding at this level will only “maintain...current levels”. And let us remember what the current levels are in the NHS: record waiting times in accident and emergency—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Hoare, I think you know better. We caught each other’s eye before, and I will not want to catch it again—seriously. You might think Halloween is for screaming, but it is not what I want to hear in this Chamber.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are 4.3 million people on national health service waiting lists and long waits to start cancer treatment. We need to go further—which is why, as we pledged in our manifesto, Labour will raise taxes on the highest earners to fund an increase above the Government’s baseline.

But it is not only the national health service that is in crisis. Defence spending has actually been cut; the size of the Army has been cut by a fifth. However, we welcome the donation based on VAT gains to commemorate the Armistice and £1.7 million more for educational programmes to ensure that people learn about the horrors of the holocaust. I join the Chancellor in absolutely condemning the horrific and vile anti-Semitic and racist attack that occurred in Pittsburgh over the weekend. We stand together with those under threat from the far right, wherever it may be, anywhere on this planet.

The Conservatives used to claim to be the party of law and order. Now they cannot even maintain law and order in our prisons, with assaults at record levels as depleted staff try to cope with the difficult situation. Our streets are less safe too. Police numbers are down, violent crime is up, and convictions are down. Chief constables are warning that criminals are taking advantage, and police officers are having to take the Government to court just to get a pay rise.

After eight years of austerity, firefighters today are paid £6,700 less than they were 10 years ago, nurses are paid £4,750 less and teachers £4,650 less. Every public sector worker deserves a decent pay rise, but 60% of teachers are not getting it, and neither are the police, nor the Government’s own civil service workers. Cleaners and security guards in the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy still are not even getting the London living wage.

The gap between those at the very top and the rest is not closing; it is growing. The pay of the chief executives of our biggest companies rose by 11% this year. They are paying themselves 145 times more than the workers in the companies that they lead. At the other end of the scale, 6.3 million workers are paid less than the real living wage—up 300,000 in the last year alone. The very lowest earners and insecure workers on zero-hours contracts or short-hours contracts will not benefit from the increase in the threshold, and they are the very people being punished by the cuts still hardwired into universal credit.

The Chancellor boasts of a “balanced approach”, but what is balanced about cutting social security for disabled people or slashing services to the bone, when by the end of this Parliament the Government will have doled out £110 billion in tax giveaways to corporations and the super-rich? Meanwhile, in the real world, homelessness has more than doubled, fewer people are able to buy a home, household debt is rising, child poverty is up to over 4 million and rising, and more disabled people are living in poverty.

Far from tackling the “burning injustices”, as the Prime Minister said her Government were going to do, they have actually made them worse and increased the injustices in our society. The Equality and Human Rights Commission warned just last week that Britain is becoming a “two-speed society”—all right for the richest few and failing the many. This Government are harsh on the weak and feeble with the strong. They labelled good people “scroungers” and “skivers” while they imposed punitive sanctions, demeaning assessments and a benefits freeze, none of which has been reversed today.

Universal credit is causing increases in poverty, food bank use, rent arrears and homelessness. When even the Work and Pensions Secretary admits that some people will be worse off, and the architect of universal credit
says the system is underfunded, it was inevitable that the Chancellor would have to act, though he is only reversing barely half the cuts made. However, the problems with universal credit are also structural, harming the self-employed, lone parents, people with larger families and survivors of domestic abuse. That is why we believe the roll-out must be halted immediately.

Since 2010, 86% of the cuts through tax and benefit measures have come from women. There was not even a recognition of, let alone money set aside for, the women born in the 1950s who have been denied pension justice. Women in Britain today have just one fifth of the pension wealth of men, in part because of the grotesque gender pay gap, which at current rates will not close until 2073. And there was no extra money to fund women's refuges—a lifeline for women fleeing from domestic abuse. Since 2010, almost a fifth of all refuges have been forced to close.

Months after the scale of the Windrush scandal became clear, the Chancellor has failed to set up a hardship fund for those affected, let alone the compensation scheme for the hundreds of people wronged by the Prime Minister's nasty and perverse “hostile environment”. We have heard no guarantees for older people, and free TV licences for the over-75s remain at risk from the Government who have threatened to tear up the triple lock, take away the winter fuel allowance from millions and force people in need to pay for care at home.

A country that fails its young people is failing its own future. Schools funding per pupil has been cut by 8%, the college budget has been slashed and the adult skills budget has been hacked by 45%. There are 123,000 children in this country living in temporary accommodation, causing them unbelievable levels of stress and uncertainty, and consequently often underachievement in schools. Children's services face a £2 billion funding gap, and we now have the highest number of children being taken into care since 1985.

Last Saturday, I visited North City children's centre in Norwich, which is threatened with closure due to council cuts. With too many children whose Sure Start centres have already closed, the users of that wonderful centre are very frightened about their future. They have benefited, like so many others have in so many other parts of the country, from the great achievement of the last Labour Government, which was children's centres and the Sure Start initiative all over the country. Spending on youth services has fallen by 62%, while 600 youth centres have closed and there are 3,500 fewer youth workers.

The UK is the only major global economy in which investment is falling. UK business investment is the lowest in the G7. This failure to invest means Britain's productivity is 15% lower than that of major economies. Public sector investment is over £18 billion lower than it was in 2010. Britain is the most regionally unequal country in Europe, with six of the 10 poorest regions in northern Europe in this country. The Government reinforce these disparities. Let us just take an example: when it comes to transport funding, the north receives £2,500 less per person than London, while people in the midlands get £1,900 less—so much for the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine.

Local economies are also struggling. Over 100,000 retail jobs have been lost in the past three years, and there are 25,000 boarded-up premises across Britain. To visit many of our high streets is to see roller-blind shutters on shops that have been closed because of job losses and the problems they have faced. The Chancellor's business rates announcement today only unpicks his own disastrous revaluation last year, and he has again delayed slashing the maximum stake on fixed odds betting terminals.

First, the Chancellor will not solve the crisis on our high streets until he tackles the institutionalised tax avoidance of big online retailers. His digital services tax, announced today, is too little, and too late. Secondly, the Chancellor must tackle the level of household debt, which is driven by low wages. High streets will not thrive until people have money to spend, so we hope he will endorse our call for the minimum wage to be a real living wage of at least £10 an hour by 2020, and to remove the discriminatory youth rates from the system.

This Chancellor has again failed to back Labour's plan to create a national investment bank, with regional development banks. Today's announcement on broadband investment is a very small step, but Britain ranks 35th in the global rankings of broadband speeds. Currently, just 2% of UK premises have full-fibre broadband compared with 80% in Spain and 100% in South Korea.

The Government still lack any meaningful strategy for creating high-skilled jobs in every region and nation, and they are failing abysmally to invest in the industries of the future necessary to tackle climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report this month was clear on the consequences: we can avoid climate catastrophe only if we act now. The Government's response has been to: cut support for our solar industries, losing 12,000 jobs in the process; slash building of onshore wind; cut subsidies for electric vehicles; and sell off the UK Green Investment Bank, and instead to back fracking in the face of overwhelming local and scientific opposition.

Ten years ago, a Labour Government passed the Climate Change Act 2008—world-leading legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050. This Government are not even on target to do that. Clean energy investment fell 56% last year, and the UK produces less of our energy from renewables than Germany, Spain, France or Italy. This Government are, I believe, failing to protect our environment, and in doing so failing to protect the future of us all.

The extra £500 million announced today to help the Government to cope with Brexit is not about planning, but about panic, and that panic is very deep rooted. Yesterday, the Chancellor said that another Budget would be necessary to set out a new economic strategy in the event of a no-deal Brexit; this morning, the Prime Minister said that all these spending commitments are funded, irrespective of a deal. It is clear: if they cannot agree a good deal with the EU, it is because they cannot agree a deal amongst themselves in the Cabinet or in the Tory party.

As we approach the crucial stage of the Government's bungled Brexit negotiations, we face a choice about the sort of economy we want. Some on the Government benches fantasise about taking Britain down the path to being a Singapore-style tax haven, with a race to the bottom in rights and protections. That must be rejected
outright. What we need is an active Government who will invest in our people in every region and every nation of our country and who will use the wealth we create to fund world-class public services. What is needed is a real break with austerity and a Government committed to raising investment across the board to rebuild our economy, communities and public services. That is a route to a country that could work for all. Austerity is not over, and the quick fixes and half measures we have heard today do not begin to measure up to the scale of the job that needs to be done to rebuild Britain.

5.8 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Everybody is leaving the Chamber—it must be something I said, or perhaps something the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) did not say. The Chancellor had a difficult job, with a conflicting economic outlook as he prepared today’s Budget, but he has offered solutions and a vision for the future, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, from whom we heard no vision, no solution and no idea what needs to be done to support growth in this country.

On the one hand, borrowing is down to its lowest levels since the beginning of the century, and although plenty of economic challenges remain—not least the need to boost growth—there are encouraging signs that pay and productivity are picking up at last, while unemployment rates remain at historic lows. As my right hon. Friend said, the OBR forecasts sustained real wage growth, and it is extremely good news—albeit undersung—that this country is no longer borrowing to fund current spending. That is the result of an enormous amount of hard work by the British people and by Ministers, including the previous Chancellor.

On the other hand, the job of bringing back down the national debt—a lasting legacy of the financial crisis—is only just beginning, and the OBR’s long-run projections make it clear that demographic pressures on the public finances will only build further from here. My right hon. Friend rightly referred to the 2019 spending review, which will be a critical moment for the future of public spending in this country.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Barely two weeks ago, the world’s scientists issued their most stark warning yet that we have just 12 years in which to tackle climate change and avoid climate catastrophe, yet there was not a single word from the Chancellor about climate change, nothing about clean energy, nothing about green energy. Does the right hon. Lady agree—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Interventions are meant to be short. I think the hon. Lady has got her message across. Nicky Morgan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I heard the Chancellor mention climate change. The hon. Lady will have her own opportunity to speak later on in this debate.

It is time to look at the next iteration of the Government’s plan to ensure that public services have the funding they need while keeping borrowing and debt under control. The Chancellor made a welcome start on that plan today by setting out how the boost to NHS spending will be funded and indicating the overall envelope for the forthcoming spending review. The Treasury Committee will of course take a close look at the detail of the plan. I particularly welcome the NHS spending on mental health. I declare an interest as a trustee of a small mental health charity in my constituency. The fact is that it is this Government who have made a clear commitment to parity of esteem for mental and physical health.

With sustainable public finances comes the resilience to deal with the challenges and risks that may lie ahead. Brexit is of course the greatest and most imminent source of uncertainty looming over the Budget. It is just stating the obvious to say that the nature of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU could up-end the economic forecast on which the Budget is based. The Office for Budget Responsibility is still playing its cards close to its chest. It is still forecasting a relatively benign Brexit with a smooth transition that has no implications for productivity. I am sure that is what we all hope for. However, its forecast of continued reductions in public borrowing depend on those benign assumptions becoming a reality. None the less, the OBR has begun to make some of its thinking about Brexit clearer. Its view of the implications of a no-deal Brexit has become very clear indeed. The nearest precedent the OBR could think of was the three-day week, which it says knocked 3% off our economy that quarter. But even assuming a smooth transition, the OBR also says that increased trade barriers with the EU, not just tariffs, will likely leave our economy smaller and reduce long-run productivity growth.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady not find it slightly disingenuous of the Chancellor to talk about a deal dividend from Brexit, when every single Treasury forecast for any Brexit deal shows that our economy will be worse off?

Nicky Morgan: It is undoubtedly the case that our economy will be worse off because of Brexit. We could have the best possible deal, but no deal secured will be as good as the deal we have at the moment. As a strong and ardent remain campaigner, I have to accept how 17.4 million in this country voted. The hon. Lady, and I am sure others in this House, will be very aware of my particular position, which is that if we are going to go down this route, there is a deal that can be done that mitigates the worst of the damage. That deal is the Norway option, which I hope my Government will seriously, seriously consider. I also gently say to the hon. Lady that had the Opposition Front Bench, particularly the Leader, played its part fully in the referendum campaign, we might well not be in this position now.

It has been said repeatedly that the divorce bill and the UK’s contributions to the EU budget will be dwarfed by how the future UK-EU relationship impacts on trade, migration and productivity. Amid this uncertainty, the Treasury Committee will support Parliament in scrutinising the economic implications of the UK’s withdrawal agreement. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will know that we have requested detailed assessments of the withdrawal agreement and the future framework, once negotiated, from the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority. We need those assessments in good time before Parliament comes to vote. The Committee has appointed a specialist adviser,
[Nicky Morgan]

Professor Sir Stephen Nickell, a former member of the OBR budget responsibility committee, who will subject the Treasury’s analysis to independent assurance. The Committee will also take evidence from the Chancellor. I know he is looking forward to that session.

As far as the Budget is concerned, the forecast on which it is based can only be considered preliminary until the OBR gets an opportunity to review the Brexit deal. The OBR’s next forecast, the spring statement, will therefore assume a greater importance than usual. The Committee will expect the OBR to receive the analysis and information it needs from Government Departments and agencies in good time to incorporate the agreement fully into its forecasts. I note that the OBR has made it clear in some documents today that it was pushed for time in the analysis that it did before the Budget. We all understand why the Budget is early, but we want to make sure that the OBR has sufficient time in future.

In that context, I remind the House of my comments at last year’s Budget debate concerning the role of the Treasury Committee in upholding the independence of the OBR as well as subjecting it to scrutiny and challenge. The OBR is a vital tool in helping this Parliament to hold the Government to account, and the Committee will continue to seek assurances that the OBR has done its work free of political interference and will defend its reputation for independent judgment, if need be. That is all the more vital given the extraordinary situation that UK politics finds itself in at the moment. I am sure the whole House would agree that when Jon Thompson, the chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, receives death threats for the evidence that he gives to my Committee, that is abhorrent and has no place in our democracy.

I have said before that the Government should not wait for Brexit before moving forward on their domestic policy agenda. In an uncertain economic climate, households are also under financial pressure, with the saving ratio at record lows and negative in cash terms. Earlier this year, the Committee’s household finances inquiry called for the Chancellor to report on the state of household finances and savings at the Budget and set out his strategy for improving their resilience. I do not think that has happened today, but I hope that it happens in future fiscal statements. I note, however, the Chancellor’s announcement of such things as income tax cuts, which very much help with the cost of living, and savings to beer duty—although I did notice the calls from my hon. Friends on the Bench behind me regarding wine duty, which I am sure he will have heeded. I also note that the Chancellor has announced a package of support for affordable credit and credit unions, including announcements on the “breathing space” changes, which will be very welcome.

Following last year’s Budget, the Committee also called for the Treasury to publish robust equalities impact assessments in future that include gender breakdowns of Budget measures. I gently remind the Leader of the Opposition that it is the Conservative party in government that has introduced the gender pay gap regulations and is on its second female leader, while the Opposition still need to have their first. The Committee will be taking evidence from the Women’s Budget Group and others later this week, and I welcome the evidence that they will give us.

The Committee has also just published its report on SME finances, making a number of recommendations that, if implemented, will allow small businesses to make an even greater contribution to our economic performance. The Chancellor has announced measures today, including in relation to the annual investment allowance, that will support small and medium-sized enterprises.

I note that the Chancellor said he would encourage the expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service to deal with problems that small and medium-sized businesses have with their banks. Neither I nor the Committee think that that goes far enough. A tribunal is needed to allow those for whom going to court is simply not an option to have their access to justice when their relationship with their bank—a critical relationship—goes so badly wrong.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am very appreciative of the Chancellor’s recognition of the work in this area by the all-party group on fair business banking and finance, but 90% of the cases that we deal with are claims well in excess of the £350,000 threshold, or even the £600,000 threshold, as recommended by Simon Walker. We need to fill that big gap in justice before we can finally put these issues behind us. Does my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) agree with that position?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much. He has done a huge amount of work in this space through his all-party group, and he has spoken eloquently in debates on this subject. Just as we welcome wage increases, which we have not seen over the last 10 years—I would argue that that is much of the reason why UK politics is in the state it is in at the moment—he is right to say that putting these issues to bed, including the relationship breakdowns between the banks and smaller businesses, is vital to allowing that important relationship to move on. That is why I think that both he and I would agree that a tribunal is the right way forward.

The Chancellor talked about productivity, which is clearly going to be part of the debate. He also talked about the need to review business rates; he is absolutely right and the help that has been given today is very important. However, the Committee will look further at business rates because, although today’s announcement is obviously welcome—I speak as somebody whose constituency office pays business rates—there has to be a more fundamental look at this issue going forward, if we want to support our retailers and small and medium-sized businesses.

The Chancellor also announced changes on digital tax, which is another issue of fairness. We welcome that announcement and await the details, and we look forward to questioning him on these issues at future scrutiny sessions. The Committee is rising to the challenge of an early autumn Budget with an accelerated schedule for our own scrutiny and analysis. As I say, we will be taking evidence from the OBR and others this week, and we look forward to hearing further from the Chancellor in a week’s time on the measures he has announced and on the economic and fiscal outlook.
As a constituency MP, I would like to thank the Chancellor for the £70 million for the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre just outside my constituency. I would have liked him to say, however, about the national retraining scheme announced in last year’s Budget. Investing in things is important to the industrial strategy, but so is investing in people and skills.

Finally, the Chancellor said right at the start that this was a Budget for the strivers, the grafters and the carers. I fully endorse his desire to build an economy that works for everyone, and we look forward to asking him further questions in the scrutiny sessions ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call the leader of the Scottish National party, I should tell people now that I expect to start off with a speech I call the leader of the Scottish National party, I should

six years, with only 14 months’ notice—

got a pension, and to find that they have had their

national insurance, they do it on the basis that they will

been betrayed by this Government. When women pay

we all recognise that what we saw was very much in the

afternoon was affected by a protest in the Gallery, but

does not even have the good grace to stay and listen to

this Conservative Government is shameful. The Chancellor

time they got what is rightly theirs. The behaviour of

many of whom are suffering in poverty, and it is about

only people who should be fixing this.

I can understand the frustration of these 1950s women, many of whom are suffering in poverty, and it is about time they got what is rightly theirs. The behaviour of this Conservative Government is shameful. The Chancellor does not even have the good grace to stay and listen to the speech by the third party’s spokesperson. That is the consequence for Parliament and their 1950s women. [Interruption.] He’s not the Chancellor and he never will be. The Chancellor stated that this was the first Monday Budget since 1962. I remind him that his predecessor who gave that Budget was gone in three months. We know the Prime Minister has little time for him and that he will no doubt be gone soon.

We hear much about the ending of austerity, including from the Prime Minister, but there was no sign of it in the Chancellor’s statement, and then we are told there will be investment in universal credit, and it is trumpeted and cheered to the rafters by Tory Members. Of course, we welcome the additional money, but when we look at the Red Book—[Interruption.] This is serious—this is about people who are really suffering—and all the Secretary of State for Education can do is chunter from a sedentary position. Show some respect for people in this country for once! According to the Red Book, the investment in universal credit through the work allowance next year will be £345 million, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation tells us that £2 billion is required, and at the same time there is a tax cut through the increase in the higher rate worth £2.8 billion. That is the reality and those are the priorities of this Conservative Government. Austerity coming to an end? Don’t kid us!

The Budget statement shows a chronic lack of understanding of the threats we face and the storm clouds ahead. The icy blast this weekend was a foretaste of the dark winter to come—a winter that the Tory Government are ill prepared for. Ten years since the Labour party presided over the financial crash, the Conservative party today risks another. Ten years on from the onset of the last recession—[Interruption.] I wish that people in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom could see the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) sitting there and laughing as we discuss matters of great importance to the people of this country.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Rubbish!

Ian Blackford: The Scottish Conservatives are a disgrace to the people of Scotland and should be utterly ashamed of themselves.

Stephen Kerr: Shocking!

Ian Blackford: He can shout all he likes. I will tell him what is shocking: the Budget from the Chancellor today.

Ten years after the onset of the last recession, history tells us that, statistically, we are likely to be closer to the next recession than to the last. The UK’s preparedness and ability to respond is impacted by the failure of leadership of the Chancellor and his Government. How ill-prepared has the Chancellor come to the Dispatch Box today! It is a pity he is not here; what disrespect he has shown.

Over the weekend, the Chancellor said that he might have to change his forecast if there was a no-deal Brexit. Can we even believe this Budget? What price will we all have to pay for a no-deal Brexit? Perhaps the Prime Minister does not believe it. Hours after the Chancellor made his announcement that a no deal would require a change in forecast, No. 10 said that it would not. What an utter shambles. Whose Budget is this, the Chancellor’s or the Prime Minister’s?

The Chancellor comes before us today without adequate planning to give us any of the assurances that his Government can protect our economy over the next few months, never mind the next few years. To add insult to injury, we were promised £350 million a week as the Brexit dividend—it was on the side of a bus—

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: Instead, we are getting 50p: a shiny new 50p to distract us from the devastation that the Government walk blindly into, as they railroad ahead with their Brexit plan.

Chris Philp: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Philp, it is up to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) whether he wishes to give way, and I think it is quite clear that he is not giving way.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that there is a precedent for the third party speech on a Budget to be made without intervention.
It is not just a no-deal Brexit that will cost families. Even if the UK gets a deal, it will cost families. The whole Brexit process will hit the economy. There is no such thing as a good Brexit, and the House must wake up to that reality. The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) can carry on gesticulating. He really is the village idiot.

The storm is coming, and the Government have not even brought an umbrella, never mind the shelter that we need. This Budget leaves us wholly unprepared for the Brexit bombshell that is heading towards us. It fails to protect current and future generations. “An end to austerity”, said the Prime Minister. Scotland’s budget will have been slashed by £1.9 billion since the Tories came to power. This from a Tory Government who are ideologically obsessed with austerity—because, after all, austerity is a political choice.

We hear about the Government’s hands having been tied by the debt burden, yet over the past nine years, the Government have found £435 billion of new money for quantitative easing. Those with money and assets were rewarded with rising house prices and financial asset prices. Ordinary working folk—the poor and the disabled—were rewarded with austerity. They paid the price for the financial crash. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has made clear that even the mildest version of “ending austerity” would cost a minimum of £19 billion, the equivalent of a penny on income tax, national insurance and VAT.

An analysis published by the Resolution Foundation stated that we needed to see a boost in annual spending of £31 billion by 2022-23 to end austerity, so let us not kid ourselves that the Tories are going to end austerity. It simply is not going to happen. There is no such boost. Austerity has not ended; austerity remains under this Tory Government. This Tory Government continue to balance the books on the shoulders of the poorest and the most vulnerable, yet they continue to give away tax cuts. That is the reality. That is why austerity is purely and simply a political choice of this Conservative Government.

To end austerity, the Chancellor would need to cancel the final year of the four-year freeze on benefits and reverse cuts in in-work benefits introduced as part of the roll-out of the new universal credit system. That would cost a combined £5.1 billion by 2022-23. We already know that cuts to social security since 2010 will cost £39 billion by 2021-22; that is £39 billion taken out of the pockets of those who would spend cash on goods and services. Cutting the incomes of the poorest in our society has depressed growth in the economy; the only people who cannot see it are the Conservatives.

[Interruption.] What about the living wage? If they were to bring in the real living wage, we would support them, but they are miles away from doing that.

Over the same period that the Women’s Budget Group has calculated that tax giveaways will cost the Treasury £47 billion, £39 billion was taken out of the pockets of the poorest and £47 billion given in tax cuts—robbing Sarah to pay John. This heartless Conservative Government have utterly failed to do the right thing, robbing citizens across the United Kingdom of a chance of increased living standards and the prosperity our communities deserve from economic growth. Austerity is hurting and this Budget will continue to hurt citizens through Tory austerity. Again, with a Tory Government we get cheap promises. Well, we have had enough of broken promises. The SNP will not support a Budget that will make our economy smaller and weaker and make our people poorer.

From 2010 consecutive UK Governments have delivered empty promises and robbed Scotland, limiting the opportunities for our Parliament and our people. This year, the Scottish Government’s fiscal budget will be £1.9 billion lower in real terms than it was in 2010-11. This is about more than the statistics; however; it is about the harsh impact on those who depend on our public services—the young, those in work, the elderly, and the disabled. We all pay a price for Tory austerity.

With Brexit coming down the tracks, this Government have picked up where Labour left off and abandoned the people of Scotland. Instead of arming themselves with a Budget that would protect jobs, drive investment and boost growth, the UK Government have delivered a Budget that will leave the communities of the United Kingdom frozen in failure. Time and again, we were told that the economy in Scotland would be stronger if we stayed with the United Kingdom—that the Union would protect jobs and that the Union would protect the Scottish economy. Well, the Union is threatening to destroy our economy by dragging us out of the European Union against our will.

Closing the door on the single market and the customs union is risking 80,000 jobs and risks losses of £2,300 on average from every person in Scotland. This Budget—this Union—has placed at the foot of the people of Scotland a choice of two futures: a future tied to a Union with the UK that will lead to further hardship and a deepening of austerity, or a future with Scotland in the EU, filled with opportunity, prosperity and economic growth, with an outward-looking Scotland and our destination within Europe, or our destination within an inward-looking United Kingdom.

The Chancellor today has made the case for the SNP. Like their Labour predecessors, this UK Government have shown their incompetence. Distracted and divided by the chaos of Brexit, the Government have not prepared for the future. Where is the vision? Where is the plan to create the circumstances that will encourage investment, drive up productivity and result in real wage growth? The fact that we have had the worst decade for wage growth in over 200 years should have sparked action by the Government to deal with that, but what do we have? We have inaction.

The Prime Minister famously talked about those who were just about managing. They have been shown to be hollow words from the Prime Minister and her do-nothing Chancellor. This is a Budget that cannot weather the Brexit storm. This is a Brexit bombshell Budget, with the clock ticking down to deliver absolute economic chaos to households right across the country. Conservative Members of Parliament sit and laugh; we talk about people who are going to be in economic hardship and Tory MPs laugh about the impact of a hard Brexit. That is the reality.

The Chancellor came before us today—he came and went—wielded a trick or treat Budget. He came to us with the hope that we would be distracted from the bigger picture by the small number of welcome announcements, most of which are undoing his Government’s shoddy policies,
but we are not. He might trick some of his more gullible Back Benchers, but he will not trick us. The UK is facing a significant social, economic and political crisis with Brexit, but this Budget utterly fails to build a safety net for our economy’s future after our exit from the European Union.

We have made it clear that, short of remaining in the EU, only membership of the single market and the customs union will best protect our economic future, yet the Government blunder on, leading us to a no-deal Brexit that will be an economic catastrophe. It is widely accepted by economists that, if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, there will be material economic disruption. We are already seeing a weakened currency, higher inflation and lower business investment growth as a result of instability and a lack of security.

The EU is the largest market for Scotland’s international exports, worth £12.7 billion in 2016. The UK Government’s own analysis shows that reverting to World Trade Organisation trading rules would reduce growth by 8%. The Scottish Government’s analysis shows that a hard Brexit threatens to cost our economy £12.7 billion a year by 2030, compared with remaining in the EU. Worse still, even if the UK signed a free trade agreement with the EU, Scotland’s GDP would be £1,610 per person lower by 2030. Households are already paying the price. Mark Carney told the Treasury Committee:

“Real household incomes are about £900…lower than we forecast in 2016. The question is why and what drove that difference. Some of it is ascribed to Brexit.”

That is the reality for Mark Carney.

The only solution to offset economic disaster, short of staying in the European Union, is to stay in the single market and the customs union. I am pleased to see that some on the Labour Benches agree with us on that, but does the Leader of the Opposition agree? We need to get real. The Chancellor has not insulated our economy to deal with Brexit, and the Prime Minister is hamstringed by the extreme Brexiteers in her own party. We must not allow the extreme Brexiteers to hold the UK to ransom. We must unite across the House to protect our economic future. I call on the Leader of the Opposition today. If he is true to his word, and if he agrees with me that this Budget is unfit for the future, he will join with the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats to keep us in the single market and the customs union. Today, Labour must show that it can be an Opposition. It must join the effective Opposition to tell the Prime Minister that she will not get a deal through this House that does not keep us in the single market and the customs union. The stakes are high. We have time, but not much. The Chancellor still has time to rethink his fiscally flawed decisions in order to help to protect our economy.

Many will study the detail of what is in the Budget, but we must also examine what is not. The UK Government should rethink and back SNP and Institute of Directors demands to introduce a small and medium-sized enterprise support service to help firms to map out and prepare their supply chains to deal with Brexit. There is so much missing from this Budget. Where is the removal of residency fees for EU citizens applying to remain in the UK? It is morally reprehensible that those living here are, through no fault of their own, facing a charge to protect their residency. That is not making EU citizens who live here welcome. It is, by extension, yet another impact of the Prime Minister’s hostile environment. The Chancellor could have waived those fees today.

Last year, the Chancellor righted a wrong when he announced that Scotland’s emergency services were no longer to be charged VAT, but where is the £175 billion that had already been paid? We want it back to invest in our emergency services—[Interjection.] I expect Scottish Tory MPs to back us on this so that we can get Scotland’s money back to invest in our public services. Yet again, this Government have ignored SNP calls to support the Scottish oil and gas industry at a time of recovery. Why has the Chancellor again sat on his hands? The UK Government are once again not stepping up to support the sector.

I come now to farmers and crofters, and I declare an interest as an active crofter, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeill)—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): How big is your estate?

Ian Blackford: I am just a simple crofter with 10 acres—[Interjection.] Let me deal with the seriousness of the situation. The European Union recognised the underfunding of hill crofters and farmers in 2013, creating a new fund from which payments were to be made between 2016 and 2020. Almost 90% of the fund was meant to come to Scotland, but we have been short-changed. We have been given only 16.5% of the funds. Some £160 million that should be going to Scottish farmers and crofters has not materialised. Where is it, Chancellor? Why has he not given Scottish crofters and farmers the money that they were due? Why has he withheld funds that were explicitly meant for Scotland? Why does he think it is right to hold back EU funds that he was meant to pass over? It is little wonder that our crofters and farmers should worry about funding post Brexit; this UK Government have form. Make no mistake that not passing over funds the EU earmarked for Scotland is a serious breach of trust. I would even go so far as to say that the UK Government have stolen that money from the pockets of crofters and farmers.

Let me turn to what the Chancellor has done in this Budget. With Brexit having pushed inflation above its 2% target for each month since February 2017, I welcome that he has frozen fuel duty. I also welcome the fact that the 2% target for each month since February 2017, I welcome that the UK Government have finally lived up to their responsibility on broadband, which is, after all, a reserved matter. Despite a few welcome gimmicks, Scotland’s promised £600 million in NHS consequentials, we are getting only £550 million. We have been short-changed again—£50 million should be coming to Scotland for health; we are not getting it.

Those at the bottom of the pile will continue to struggle while the Tories fail to put dignity and respect at the heart of their social security policies. By 2021, low-paid women stand to lose £1,400 a year from changes to universal credit, according to the Women’s Budget Group. A couple with two children will be £832 a year worse off due to the benefit freeze, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Some 600,000 three-child families will see £2,500 a year robbed from their budgets, and those with four or more children will lose around £7,000 a year. The Chancellor could have done the right
thing today. He could have halted and fixed universal credit. Instead, he failed to go far enough to put money into the pockets of those who desperately need it.

The SNP has long championed the case against cuts to the work allowances, and another U-turn from the Tories is welcome, but it does not go far enough. The Chancellor's increased spending on universal credit is nothing but a drop in the ocean. He is putting a sticking plaster on a wound that needs to be redressed. His failure to halt and review universal credit means that more people will be left behind, left in poverty, left in hardship and left struggling by a Tory Government.

Now, I do not think that there is a magic money tree, but political choices can be made: to deliver a society where the sick or unemployed can be helped out of hardship; or a society that punishes the poor and abandons those who are out of work. Why has the Chancellor failed again to end age discrimination and give young people, as well as other workers, a real living wage?

Since Brexit, electricity bills have gone up by 17.1% and gas bills by 4.3%—young people continue to be left behind with those higher prices. All workers should be treated fairly, yet this Government continue to underpay young people. Young people have again been short-changed, as the Chancellor has failed to pay a real living wage. Young people in Scotland deserve better. The Chancellor should immediately devolve the powers so that the SNP Scottish Government can uplift young people and end this discrimination.

But it is not just young people. Women born in the 1950s have seen their pensionable age increase by as much as six years, in some cases with only 14 months' notice. We in the SNP have long accepted that the equalisation of men and women's pensionable age should happen, but the women affected by the changes had paid national insurance on the condition that they would get their state pension earlier than many of them now are. They have been short-changed. Women's pensionable age has increased too quickly, and many are living in poverty, relying on benefits. Of course, in a Westminster Hall debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), ludicrously suggested that the women affected should think about going on apprenticeship schemes. Talk about a lack of humanity. Absolutely outrageous. This is a Government who simply do not get it and do not accept their responsibility.

Why was this not addressed in the Budget? Where is the dignity? Where is the compassion for the millions of women who have given a lifetime of service? It is utterly shameful that that issue has not been addressed, and it is not going to go away. The Chancellor should have listened to the SNP on 1950s women and, more widely, on austerity.

The Scottish Government are already delivering £125 million of mitigation in this year alone to protect those hit by Tory austerity. We have established in law that social security is a human right, and I recommend that this House also thinks about that. We are building a social security system based on dignity and respect. Society is only as strong as its weakest link. Social security is not just a nice thing to provide; it is a necessity that we provide a safety net to those who need it.

We are also working to bolster our economy and society by supporting business and by working to boost job opportunities and growth: a 64% increase of £4.2 billion in the economy, jobs and fair work budget, as part of a total investment of £2.4 billion in enterprise and skills; a 70% increase in investment in business research and development; £18 million as part of a £65 million package of investment in the National Manufacturing Institute; and £340 million of resources set aside to provide initial capitalisation for the Scottish national investment bank. The Leader of the Opposition called for a UK state investment bank; we are getting one in Scotland, courtesy of the SNP.

The Scottish Government have an ambitious programme of infrastructure investment for 2018-19 of more than £4 billion, in line with the “Programme for Government” commitment to invest £20 billion over the lifetime of our Scottish Parliament. That is our commitment to infrastructure investment.

In Scotland we are using the powers we have to change lives for the better and to strengthen our economy, and it is working. Scotland has strong economic fundamentals, with higher growth than the UK as a whole and the most inward investment anywhere in the UK outside London. Scotland's economy grew by 0.5% in the second quarter of 2018, faster than the UK. Over the past 12 months, the Scottish economy has grown by 1.7%, faster than the 1.2% in the UK. The Scottish Government are delivering for the people of Scotland.

According to the Office for National Statistics, long-term pay growth has been highest in Scotland and lowest in Wales. Median pay for full-time workers is 87% higher in Scotland than it was in 1997. Fraser of Allander expects Scotland to have higher growth and lower unemployment than the UK in 2019 and 2020. Scotland's female unemployment rate fell over the quarter and year to 3.2%, lower than the UK's 4%. In the face of Tory austerity, the Scottish Government are building an economy of the future with measures to unlock innovation and drive increased productivity.

In Scotland, those measures, outlined in the “Programme for Government”, have been welcomed by the business sector. Scottish businesses, customers and our workforce rely on robust and reliable infrastructure, as the foundation which keeps our economy moving, and it is right to increase investment in that area—but it will not stop there. The Scottish growth commission's report is clear that an independent Scotland can leave the broken economic model of the UK and deliver an inclusive, sustainable growth programme. If the approach to spending growth recommended by the commission had been applied by Westminster over the past decade, the £1.9 billion cut in real terms to Scotland's budget would have been wiped out.

The report recommends adopting the following fiscal rules: that the deficit is reduced to below 3% of GDP within five to 10 years; that national debt does not increase beyond 50% of GDP and stabilises at that level; and that borrowing is undertaken for public investment only over the course of the economic cycle. Closing the per capita income gap to the median of the 12 best-performing small advanced economies, the report's peer group, through a 21st century economic model focusing on productivity, population and participation would mean, in today's values, an additional £22 billion in GDP and a potential additional £9 billion in tax revenues—that is £4,100 per person.
In Scotland, we are not just focusing on the now; we are focusing on the future. The Chancellor today attempts to pull the wool over our eyes and distract us from the bigger picture, but we are not distracted. This Budget is a typical Tory offering: giving with one hand and taking with another. The Budget exposes to the people of Scotland that there is a choice to build a better future—to be treated this like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the entire Treasury team, the Financial Secretary included, on the further progress they have made in the past two and a half years? I remind Members that we inherited a budget deficit of £175 billion—10.5% of GDP—in 2010. At that point, of every £4 being spent by the Government, £1 was being borrowed. I think I heard the Leader of the Opposition blaming the financial crisis, but there had been a budget deficit in each and every year from 2001—a full six or seven years before the financial crisis even began. So I am pleased to see the budget deficit coming down from £175 billion to £27 billion next year—the lowest year-on-year borrowing since 2002. But it is worth reminding ourselves that we are still borrowing money—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If Labour’s spending was so terrible in those years, why did George Osborne and David Cameron say that they would match it pound for pound?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman is recalling a little bit of ancient history, but if he looked at the debate within the Conservative party around the time of the party conference in 2006, he would find some interesting submissions to the debate within the party at that time.

We are still borrowing, and it is worth recalling that. Debt is peaking now, at 80% of GDP. Of course, for the years that debt has increased, we see that the maths make that an inevitability if we are running a deficit. Although reducing debt as a percentage of GDP to 74% by 2023 is progress, I worry whether that figure will be too high in terms of our stated mission of fixing the roof while the sun is shining. Labour Members say that debt is too high and that we have not done a good enough job on cutting the deficit. So what do they think we should have cut more? It is worth recalling that Alistair Darling’s pledge in 2015 was to only halve the deficit, which would of course have led to much higher debt.

Other successes of those years are, first, the increase in capital expenditure, which has not featured so far in the reactions to this Budget. It is increasing by a healthy 4% per annum over the next four years—that is a case of building for the future. So we have been fixing the roof while the sun is shining, but the job is not yet done. We need to bring debt down below the 74%—and not through tax rises. This country is already sufficiently taxed. I warmly welcome our meeting the 2015 manifesto commitments on the personal allowance and on the £50,000 higher rate threshold. Meeting those one year early is very encouraging.

I also welcome measures to encourage the conversion of surplus retail to residential properties, which is incredibly important in constituencies such as mine, where we have a lot of retail space that has been dead since even before Amazon came along—that has simply been unable to be converted to residential. That move is very welcome. The extra Brexit resources are sensible, and I hope that they will include money for the Department for International Trade to take advantage of future trading opportunities, although the £2 billion increase in UK Export Finance capital is also welcome. I am disappointed that there are no specific further funds for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea for dealing with the Grenfell tragedy.
[Greg Hands]

I want to speak about something that was not in the Budget but which may have to be in due course—stamp duty land tax, which goes back to my point about crofters, lairds and the leader of the SNP. I have been a keen observer over the years of these changes, and I am glad the Financial Secretary is in his place. I was not part of the Treasury team in autumn 2014 that made those important reforms, and I would have urged caution at that time, but there must be a question as to whether stamp duty land tax is too high, including at the top of the market. I ask the Treasury to consider this in good time. There is no point coming to a fast conclusion on SDLT.

Many of the principles of the reforms were sound. Home purchases were made cheaper for 90% of properties and the SDLT slab system was removed. Subsequent reforms have meant that people pay more for second-home ownership, which is reasonably correct, and there is no SDLT at all for many first-time buyers, which is beneficial. There has to be a question, though, as to whether the overall yield from SDLT can be improved. If I understand it, to date the receipts are down by 10% a year. In August, only 79,000 homes throughout the UK were sold at all. That is down 4% year on year. If I read the numbers correctly, there is a £1 billion shortfall compared with the OBR estimate.

The increase in stamp duty land tax on homes worth more than £937,500—

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con) rose—

Greg Hands: I will not take any more interventions as I will not get any more time.

It may seem bizarre to speak about people in such homes, but in large parts of inner London, £937,500 does not buy an astronomically sized home. That is the cost of a typical large flat or small house in many parts of inner London. The average buyer in my constituency now pays £43,000 in stamp duty land tax. For many Members, £1.5 million may sound like a huge amount, and it is, but that is the average price for a three-bedroom house in my constituency. If someone wished to trade up to a four-bedroom house because their family had increased, they would have to pay £153,750 in stamp duty alone. That is increased from £53,750—three times as much.

What are the effects of the change? First is the question of whether revenue is being maximised at a time when we need revenue. Secondly, it is a serious tax on home ownership in general. Thirdly, it heavily penalises downsizers. If someone is in a larger house and looking to move to a smaller house, which is a socially beneficial activity, they are heavily penalised by the SDLT consideration on their new house, as well as the buyer of their previous house having to fork out more than £150,000 or £200,000, in some cases.

Fourthly, it encourages the over-development of homes, which is to be seen all day, every day around my constituency and in much of inner London, as people are tax-incentivised to extend their homes rather than buy and sell to move to a larger or, indeed, smaller home. The amount of building works has sky-rocketed. I did a poll of my local estate agents and residents and got some very interesting frontline responses about the effects.

Fifthly, it encourages over-conservativism in property moves. People think, "It is so expensive to move. I have to make sure I’ve got it right." That can cause a delay in a property move that may be unfavourable to the economy. Sixthly, it cuts labour mobility and, as such, social mobility. If someone gets a new job in a more expensive part of the country, it will cost them a huge amount to make the move in order to take the job.

I welcome the Budget, the tax cuts being introduced and the extra money for the NHS. We have to keep a close eye on debt. I support the Budget.

6.3 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): This Budget will do nothing for the growing number of Members, Opposition and Government, who are troubled that their constituents are not only hungry but being pushed towards destitution. If there is one thing we should vote on, I hope it will be a resolution that shows how unfair the Budget is for the group of people who have given most to the country’s recovery.

The analysis that the House of Commons Library has done for several Members looks at the cuts in living standards, since the coalition Government came in, for those who are of pensionable age—a growing number of us—and those with families. Pensioners have seen increases in their standard of living every year. That is good, but it does not help much to reduce the budget deficit. The whole budget deficit has been put on families, particularly those with children. There was silence on that from the Chancellor as he told us that we were turning the corner and lifting the burden of austerity. Surely to goodness those who have borne most in making a success of getting the budget deficit and fiscal deficit down should be first in the queue to get some relief.

There was no relief in the Budget for the cuts in the social security budget, the most deadly of which was the freeze in benefits that each year makes it more and more difficult for the most vulnerable to manage their budgets. It is no surprise that food banks throughout the country, along with other organisations, report an increase in the number of people who are reduced to going to food banks or who are taking other actions to try to assuage their hunger. I say this to Members from all parties, because the Opposition have failed to convince the Government of how serious things are. There is something deeply shameful in talking about lifting austerity while at the same time making sure that the cuts for families will get worse next year, the year after and the year after that.

Linked to that is what we will do with universal credit. The National Audit Office gave us the grim report that it was a benefit that the Government could not scrap but did not know whether it could go forward. The Government’s answer today was to make some very important additions to the universal credit budget. I am grateful, as all of us who see our constituents massacred by this benefit must be, but there are four big changes that the Government have yet to announce that will be necessary if we are to be satisfied that universal credit can be rolled out safely to every one of our constituents.

First, will the Government extend legacy benefits right up to the time when people claim universal credit? There was talk about some changes, but they have not been announced today. Such a change would mean that...
nobody—but nobody—would be without money. On the day that their universal credit payments started, their legacy benefits would stop. Will the Government commit themselves to that change?

Secondly, we talk about single parents going out to work, and many of them try to do so, but their childcare payments are not paid during the first month. They can be claimed after the first month. If we are serious about people with children moving from universal credit into work, should we not make those payments up front?

Thirdly, people can get an advance, which is good, but that advance has to be paid back. For working-class people who are used to payment on a daily or weekly basis, it is totally inadequate to have a benefit that is designed for middle-class budgets like ours and to talk about an advance. I had hoped that we would hear more from the Chancellor than some support for credit unions, welcome as that is. We need a system of citizens banks that work with universal credit and are targeted at people on universal credit, so that they can get a loan up front—meaning no collapse in payments—that they then pay back, free of interest, over a reasonable period.

Fourthly, the guardians of the roll-out ought to be Citizens Advice, which the Government have commissioned to provide the all-important roll-out service. If Citizens Advice says, “We cannot yet take any more universal credit claimants for the moment because we cannot provide the wraparound care,” will the Government listen—if not to Members from the Government and the Opposition, then at least to the body that the Government have charged to look after the roll-out and to make sure that people can move from their current situation to universal credit payments?

There is a challenge for those on the Front Bench—my Front Bench or whatever old Front Bench you want to call it—which is to put down a motion behind which we on these Benches and the people of good will on the Conservative Benches can unite to say that we are not satisfied with the Budget, which leaves in place all those austerity measures that most affect families, particularly families with children. There was no relief for those families. There was no relief for those austerity measures that most affect families, particularly families with children. There was no relief for those families. There was no relief for those families. There was no relief for those families. There was no relief for those families.

6.10 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) who commands huge respect in this House. I agreed with much of what he said, but I remind the House that increasing personal allowances and creating an economy that now has the lowest unemployment since 1975 is another way, perhaps the main way, to help people on low incomes and people who have been in poverty in the past.

I welcome much in this Budget; it is a balanced Budget. I certainly welcome the increases in personal allowances, the extra money for mental health and defence and what the Chancellor said about enterprise, which I will come on to in a moment. I also welcome his realism on Brexit. He made it very clear that he expects Britain to get a good deal. He has also explained very clearly that he will make sure that, if we do not get that deal, we will be prepared for that eventuality. Indeed, there may well be an emergency Budget. I am also optimistic. The Prime Minister has laid down those red lines, which I support 100%. We cannot countenance any initiative or structure that treats Northern Ireland fundamentally differently from the rest of the UK, thus undermining our precious Union. We certainly cannot accept a backstop that is completely open-ended. I know that 50 of our most talented civil servants are working on Brexit and I am confident that, with good will and a degree of flexibility on Europe’s side, we will get a deal. I ask the Minister, in the unlikely event of our getting no deal, what happens to the £39 billion? How much of that will actually be committed and owed, and how much of it will come back and revert to the Treasury? Will he answer that point?

I really was impressed by the Chancellor’s vision for the future—for Britain over the next number of years. For the first time in a long, long time, and at a time when the EU faces huge problems, a Conservative Minister has actually laid out a really clear vision for the future. In fact, what is happening in Italy could precipitate a systemic pan-European monetary union crisis and put at risk the very survival of the euro, and, at the same time, we are looking at markets elsewhere and are actually optimistic about the future. I was really pleased that the Chancellor said that. I think that he would agree with me that what we need is a high-skill, high-productivity, low-tax, business-friendly economy. There is still some way to go to simplify our tax system, and, when I look at Tolley’s Tax Guide, I see it getting bigger and bigger. Just as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) had a word of caution about austerity, there should be a word of caution also about the fact that the UK has recently slipped down the OECD rankings of the most competitive tax systems in the world. We have gone down to 23rd from about 15th. We must arrest that.

On the wider economy, it is good news that the OBR has predicted a 7% drop in our borrowing for this year and, as a result, the Government will be £13 billion ahead on the forecast. All of this is taking place at the same time as we have better growth than expected—we might even have better growth this year than both France and Germany—exceptional employment figures, wage growth at 3.1% and inflation easing to 2.4%. Yes, there are numerous woes, not least on the high street, but the overall picture is incredibly encouraging, and the Chancellor made that clear. I also agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) when he said that we have to be realistic and cautious about austerity. As he pointed out, when the coalition Government took office, we inherited an all-time record debt—is currently £41 billion. We should remind Opposition Members, particularly the shadow Chancellor, that, at the moment, that £41 billion, which is equivalent to just slightly more than the policing budget, slightly more than the transport budget, and 40% of the education budget, is currently manageable and fundable. That is at a base rate of 0.75%. If rates returned to the pre-recession levels of 4% to 6%, the amount the Government would spend on debt interest would quadruple. I just say to the shadow Chancellor that some of his spending commitments,
some of his proposals for a massive spending surge, are not only grossly irresponsible, but quite cruel on the many people whose hopes will have been built up by that.

I just want to say something very quickly about the high street. I warmly welcome what the Chancellor said about the high street. Our local high street in King’s Lynn is thriving, despite all the closures of national chains. I particularly welcome what he said about the high street fund. We must get more flats above shops in high streets opened up for people to live in. If I look back 50-odd years ago to when I was a child in King’s Lynn, there were many independent retailers in our local market towns. Every single one of them had a flat above a shop where either the retailer or someone in his family lived. Many of those retailers have been taken over by large chains and most of the flats are now empty. I recently went round King’s Lynn, fairly late in the evening, and saw for myself that about 10% of the flats are now occupied. We need changes in the planning system, a much easier route to converting these flats back into accommodation and a change of attitude as the part of many of the regional and unit managers of these national stores. Very often, this is not on their agenda; it is in the “too difficult to do” category. If we take this issue forward with the high street fund, we can seize an opportunity to transform many of our market towns.

In conclusion, it was Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the Minister of Finances for France, who said:

“The art of taxation consists in so plucking the goose as to procure the largest quantity of feathers with the least possible amount of hissing”.

The Chancellor’s innovation and imagination has meant that he has not had to follow that advice and he has produced a first-class Budget that I fully support.

6.18 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Budget today neither ends austerity nor shows that our economy is on a strong and resilient footing. On page 7 of the OBR document, our growth trajectory is referred to as “unspectacular”. Even by 2023, eight years after the last Chancellor, George Osborne, said that the budget deficit would be eliminated, we still have a budget deficit.

In my short time this afternoon, I will just look at some of the detail on family finances and business taxation and, finally, at Brexit. The £1.7 billion announced for universal credit work allowances by the Chancellor this afternoon is welcome, but it falls short of the £3 billion that is necessary to ensure that no one is worse off under universal credit and it only undoes one half of the cuts made by George Osborne to universal credit just two years ago. It is somewhat ironic that the Chancellor tells us today that he is introducing a scheme to help people struggling with problem debt—although this scheme is worth only £5 million and is for one year only—but it has not occurred to him or the Prime Minister why people are struggling with debt in the first place. They are struggling with debt because of the ongoing austerity, because wages are not keeping up with the rising cost of living, because they are working in the gig economy or on zero-hours contracts, and because they work in the public sector and have not had a pay rise for almost a decade. It is also worth reflecting that 60% of families in poverty today are in work. They are working hard, often in more than one job or in the precarious gig economy. They are working for their poverty and their children’s poverty too.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies forecast that a further 1 million children will fall into poverty in the next five years, taking the number of children in poverty to a record high of over 5 million, including 7,000 children in my constituency of Leeds West. While we are talking of the next generation, today’s announcement of £400 million for schools, although welcome, is less than what the Chancellor announced to fix potholes. Although we all agree that potholes are an issue in all our communities, I think that we would probably all agree that the education and future of our children are more important. The numbers equate to £10,000 for a primary school and £50,000 for a secondary school, which works out as £24 to £48 per child per year—50p or £1 a week, or about 20p a day per child. The Chancellor said it was to pay for those extra little things, but our children, the next generation, were offered very little extra indeed in his speech this afternoon.

I want to say something about business taxation. The experience of families on low and middle incomes jars with what is happening in some parts of our corporate sector and with some of the evidence that we have taken on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, some of it jointly with the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) chairs. People are angry, and rightly so when, 10 years after the financial crisis, they see corporate bosses engaging in the sort of malpractice and incompetence that characterised the management of Carillion, BHS and, most recently, Patisserie Valerie. The Chancellor has said today that he is ending PFI and PF2, but when Carillion collapsed the Government had a choice: to take its contracts back in-house or farm them out to other PFI contractors. They chose the latter, embracing PFI rather than bringing those contracts back in-house, which we know will deliver better value for money and better public services.

Meanwhile, we have seen the new head of Royal Mail given a £5.8 million golden hello to take the job of chief executive, while not paying a penny of tax in the UK—another example of botched Tory and Liberal Democrat privatisation. We have also seen the Persimmon CEO take home £35 million last year, while the firm does not even guarantee all its workforce a living wage. The chief executive of Persimmon was one of the few beneficiaries of the Government’s Help to Buy scheme. He has enjoyed a huge bonus on the back of that, while very few people benefited with more affordable homes.

If the Prime Minister had fulfilled her promise to put workers on the boards of our businesses, I am sure that such an outrageous pay packet would not have been awarded, but workers on boards is just another broken promise from this Government. It would now take a worker on the average wage 167 years to earn what a FTSE 100 CEO earns in just one—austerity for some, and largesse and riches for others. Austerity is well and truly over in the boardroom. What a contrast with the lives and experiences of the vast majority of our constituents. At Carillion and elsewhere we have also seen auditors in a cosy cartel, failing to do a decent job
while executives make reckless decisions over their companies' futures and the futures of people who work for them. Government and regulators must do more.

The Chancellor could have used today's Budget to cancel the further cut in corporation tax from 19% to 17%—which will cost £6 billion and overwhelmingly help bigger businesses—and instead use the money to support smaller businesses and our struggling high streets, which the Government say are the priority. But today's announced changes to business rates, while welcome, are worth just a quarter of the additional cut to corporation tax, at £1.5 billion. Again we see the Government's priority: a tax cut for big businesses while others have to struggle. We see the same with the digital tax. Although it is worth £400 million, page 234 of the OBR's Blue Book says that the uncertainty associated with achieving that figure is very high. Indeed, the Chancellor has announced only a consultation. Where is the urgency? Where is the action? Frankly, when we consider the profits of those huge companies, £400 million is hardly very much.

Finally, hanging over this Budget is Brexit. Yesterday the Chancellor failed to answer the most basic of questions: will the public finances and our people be better or worse off with a Chequers deal than what we have at the moment? He could not or would not answer, because it is increasingly clear that the Government's botched negotiations will leave us all worse off. As for a no-deal Brexit, the Chancellor said it would mean having to rip up this Budget and start again. He said in this afternoon's statement that he is putting money aside if the economy needs additional support, paving the way for a spring Budget and preparing for every eventuality. The Office for Budget Responsibility has revised down net exports next year and says that it is difficult to make any economic forecasts at all because of the huge uncertainty. Nobody voted for this mess. That is why we should now go back to the country with a people's vote.

6.26 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the register, but I am not going to be talking about them.

I welcome this Budget. I particularly welcome the decision to provide some more money for crucial public services. In Wokingham and West Berkshire, we need more money for social care, and there is some in the Budget. We need more money for our local surgeries and hospitals, and a lot of money will be coming through for the health service in the years ahead. I just urge the Government to ensure that it is well spent and that there a proper prospectus before the money is finally committed in detail.

We definitely need more money for our roads and local transport. I am pleased to see funds with imaginative ideas to improve flows and safety over junctions and to ensure more roundabout junctions and improvements in strategic local route networks. I will be working with West Berkshire and Wokingham Councils, encouraging them to come forward with schemes that I hope qualify, because these are important to the productivity of my part of the world and, indeed, any part of the United Kingdom. Anyone with customers or clients in their area who goes to work daily in a van or car cannot book as many appointments as they would like and might lose one or two contracts each day because they are spending far too many minutes or even hours in traffic jams, particularly at the busy periods of the day. We therefore need to improve flows, which can also improve safety and lower fuel usage, which would be great benefits.

I also welcome the way that the Chancellor is injecting a bit more money into the economy, because there has been quite a sharp fiscal and monetary squeeze administered to the economy since March 2017. The story so far is one of dreadfully inaccurate forecasting by the OBR and the Treasury. We had the idiotic, wild forecasts about how we would have a recession, falling house prices and a big increase in unemployment if we voted to leave the European Union. They said that that would happen in the winter of 2016-17, whereas I am pleased to say that the economy continued to grow pretty well until March 2017. Jobs and employment went up and house prices did not tumble in the way that was forecast, because Brexit was not bad news. A lot of people thought that Brexit was very good news, and they went out and spent a bit more money because they liked it.

We then had a fiscal and monetary squeeze. The Bank of England has put interest rates up, and it withdrew special lines of credit from the clearing banks and issued instructions to lend less against cars and certain types of houses. That had a visible impact on the car and housing markets. We had a fiscal squeeze, because as we see in today's figures, in this year alone £7.4 billion more has been collected in tax and £4.5 billion less has been spent on public services than was forecast in March. There has therefore been a £12 billion—I presume unplanned—fiscal squeeze on the economy since March, and there was also a squeeze in the previous year, combined with a rather sharp monetary squeeze, whereby money growth has now halved, as a result of what I think was the Bank of England's fairly untimely and overdone interventions. I do not think there is a huge inflation problem out there, and I think the action that it has taken is too strong.

I am therefore delighted that something has been given back. What the Chancellor is giving back next year—about £11 billion—only matches the £12 billion of the squeeze that was being taken out this year. The OBR says, "This is a big giveaway," but it is not actually a giveaway compared with what it said as recently as March this year. One needs to put that into perspective.

We now have to discuss what impact Brexit will have. All the forecasts grossly exaggerate the economic impact of Brexit. It is an extremely important political event, but I do not think we will see it on world economic graphs when we look back in two or three years' time, and I think we would be hard pushed to see it on the graphs of the UK economy as well. The effect could be reasonably neutral. If we go for a no-deal Brexit because, unfortunately, the EU does not offer us something that is better than no deal, or if there is a continued breakdown in the negotiations—at the moment, the Chequers plan does not look very popular with the EU—then, yes, the Chancellor is right that we will need an additional Budget, but it will be a Budget full of good news because it will be the Budget to spend the £39 billion.

An awful lot of Brexit voters voted in part to take back control of our money. The OBR confirms that if we go ahead with the withdrawal agreement it has in mind, we will indeed be asked to spend £39 billion, sending that money over the exchanges to be spent in
relatively rich continental Europe rather than having it available for our own priorities here. So will it not be great to have a Budget to confirm that we can spend £39 billion in a no-deal scenario?

Sir Henry Bellingham: A moment ago, as my right hon. Friend will recall, I also made the point about the £39 billion. It is incredibly important that the Government clarify the situation on that, because some Ministers are saying that part of it is owed contractually in many different ways, while other Ministers are saying that the whole lot would revert to the Treasury in the event of no deal. Surely, the Minister must clarify that when he winds up.

John Redwood: I have looked into this. I have taken advice from lawyers. I have also read the report from the House of Lords—not a known bastion of leave enthusiasm. Its legal conclusions were wholly admirable. It said, “No, there is no legal requirement to pay a penny to the EU after we have left.” If we leave on 29 March 2019, we would definitely save that money. There is no requirement to pay. We did not get a bonus when we joined the thing, because there were lots of inherited liabilities, so we do not have to go on paying for liabilities after we have left. That is quite an absurd proposition. We should be able to grasp this opportunity.

If we were able to spend that £39 billion over a three-year period—I know that it is spread over three years and does not come all in one year—there would be, over that period, a 2% boost to the UK economy. That could take our growth rate back up to about 2% per annum. The OBR forecasts are a bit gloomy, and it could be that our economy has grown by only 1.5%, but that is underperforming. We need to ask why that is, and it is certainly nothing to do with Brexit. The reason the growth rate fell is, as I say, deliberate policy by the Treasury creating a combined monetary and fiscal squeeze. This Budget does something to start to lift the fiscal part of that squeeze, and that is very welcome.

It is crucial that we do end austerity. I am absolutely with the Prime Minister on this. Indeed, I fought two elections on the proposition that we want prosperity not austerity. I strongly agree with the Chancellor that we should define austerity, as the public do, in its wider sense. Austerity does not just mean not having enough money for social care, which we need to remedy; it means that people’s real wages have not gone up enough or at all, so they are not better off. People expect us collectively, as a result of our interventions in the economy and our supervision of the general position, to help them to progress and have real income increases so that they can afford more and improve their lifestyles as they go on life’s journey. That is what we should be doing. We should be in the business of promoting more jobs, better-paid jobs and lower taxes so that people keep more of the money from those jobs and the income they are earning. I therefore welcome the bringing forward of the income tax reductions, which will be very helpful.

I also strongly support tackling the problem of low pay. There is still too much low pay, and I am glad that the Government regard this as an important issue. We need to do more on productivity measures, because the real way to eradicate low pay is by higher productivity: “Work smarter and get paid more” is what we need to be thinking and doing. That requires a whole raft of the policies that were mentioned in the parts of the Budget document on education, training, transport and many other areas. That will contribute to making a more productive economy.

I am fully behind the Government’s aim of banishing austerity. I am fully behind the aim of getting real wages up and allowing people to spend a lot more of their own money. I want the £39 billion because that would be a really knock-out blow in getting a stronger and better economy.

6.35 pm

Meg Hillier: It is about commitments that have already been made, and we have to pay our share of that as we were members at the time.

The Chancellor talked about this Budget being for strivers, grafters and carers, and he said that austerity was not driven by ideology. His own phrases demonstrate, as austerity has demonstrated every step of the way, a disconnect with the reality of people’s lives. He talked about 3.3 million more people being in jobs and the proportion of low-paid jobs being at its lowest. I wonder what measure that was based on, because very many of my constituents have low-paid and insecure jobs working on zero-hours contracts, which may have their place for certain people but not for those who are trying to pay the family bills and trying to pay the rent on time. In my constituency, we also have huge issues with housing, on which, as I say, I will go into in more detail.

The digital services tax is very interesting to me as the Member representing Shoreditch and all the tech businesses there, including some of the big players. This is only a consultation, of course. The big question, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) highlighted, is whether it will deliver a result. If it only raises up to £400 million, as I think the Chancellor said, it will not recover the tax that some of the big tech giants have avoided through their complex multinational tax arrangements. I will be watching this closely, not
least to see whether those big players will cough up, but also to make sure that the growing start-up businesses in my constituency will be protected as the Chancellor has said. We need an ecosystem of tech businesses. We need those start-ups to start and grow in Britain so that they become the big employers and the responsible taxpayers of the future.

On local government funding, the £650 million in grant funding as a one-off is not good enough. We have had so much money taken out of local councils. Their real-terms spending on social care, for example, reduced by 5.3% between 2010 and 2017, while the number of over-85s rose by 28% between 2006 and 2016—a slightly longer period. The £20 billion for the NHS does not cover social care. It may make small contributions, but on its own it is not enough.

Since 2010-11, in my own borough, Hackney Council has had £130 million cut from its core grant funding from the Government. Dividing the £650 million by the number of local authorities in the country, Hackney will get a tiny amount, possibly for only one year. I think the Chancellor said—obviously, I have not had time to go through the Red Book. The cuts to Hackney so far are the equivalent of £471 per head—one of the largest cuts in England. In terms of spending power, Hackney will lose £1,425 per household between 2010 and 2020—the highest amount in the country—and we have £30 million more of cuts to find.

We are having big discussions about some budget cuts with Government, particularly for special educational needs, which Hackney Council has been cross-subsidising since 2011 from other parts of the budget. There is only so far that we can squeeze before the pipes squeak, and the pipes have been squeaking for some time now in Hackney.

I will not repeat what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West said, but suffice it to say that the problems with universal credit were predicted, foreseeable and exacerbated by the £2 billion of cuts under the former Chancellor. The Public Accounts Committee has been looking at universal credit since 2012, and our voice was added to a chorus of concern. The Government just have to listen, but they are detached from the reality of people’s lives.

In the past, there has been broad cross-party consensus on universal credit. It is still not Labour policy to completely get rid of it; there would be a pause, a review and an assessment of what could be done to make it work, because it would be very difficult to unpick it now. If we want universal credit to work, we need a Government who are listening and understanding people’s needs. My hon. Friends have outlined the problems.

For my borough, housing and homelessness is the really big issue. In London as a whole, almost nine in 10 households believe that there is a housing crisis in the capital. In Hackney, a borough-wide survey in 2015 showed that housing affordability was the top concern for residents, and things have got worse since then. The average house price in Hackney South and Shoreditch is £530,000 as of March this year. Hackney now has 34,000 privately rented homes, which is around 30% of all homes in the borough—a proportion that has more than doubled in the past decade. Rents in the private sector are astronomically high and out of many people’s reach. Rising rents have meant that the average two-bedroom property now costs £1,820 a month in the private market, which is over £300 a month more than in 2011—and that is if people are lucky; many are more expensive than that.

The brutal reality is that, given the cap, housing benefit does not pay the rent on any three or four-bedroom property in my borough or in many boroughs. In London and the south-east in general, people will find it hard to pay their rent if they are relying on housing benefit. Let us be clear: the majority of people claiming housing benefit are in work, which puts the lie to what the Chancellor said about employment solving everything. Of course employment is important, but the jobs have to be decent enough to pay the wages.

A 2017 report by Shelter ranked Hackney 10th in a list of the 50 areas in the country with the highest levels of homelessness—something the Chancellor did not mention. According to that survey, one in 44 Hackney residents were either sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation. This is a real issue. My surgeries are full of people who are desperate: women sent home from hospital with a baby and toddler to a hostel where they have been living for 18 months or two years. Four or five years ago, they were waiting only six months. Six months in a hostel was bad, but 18 months has a destroying effect on family life, the ability to work and the ability of children to study.

There has been a 300% rise in homelessness in Hackney since 2010, with 3,000 households now living in temporary accommodation. Hackney’s bill for temporary accommodation has gone up from £26 million in 2013-14 to £54.8 million—an increase of over 100%. That is money down the drain—money that is not helping people, but just keeping a vague, bare roof over their heads and nothing more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West touched on education. It is important to highlight that we in Hackney have some of the best schools in the country. We heard that there will be a £400 million in-year bonus for some little extras—what a patronising way to provide money for our children’s education. That means £10,000 for a primary school and £50,000 for a secondary school on average, which is not even enough to pay for the teachers they are having to shed, not enough to make up the short weeks they are having to introduce and not enough to reintroduce the full curriculum that they have had to cut.

I have not even had a chance to get into the details of Brexit or the fact that policing is under such siege in our city and in my borough. Extraordinarily, for the first time in my 13 years as an MP and 25 years in elected office, I have had a stream of people coming to my office, I have had a stream of people coming to my surgeries saying that the police did not investigate something—not something they would normally come to an MP about. It is becoming a pattern, because we have lost a fifth of our officers in Hackney.

To finish on a positive point, I welcome the business rates relief, if the evaluation delivers what the Chancellor says it will. I have lobbied for that in the past. But on the rest, austerity is not over for my constituents—it is still biting hard—and the Government have got to get in tune with the lives of real people.
to follow the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), although I do not share her take on the Budget.

The Treasury team have done a good job of putting together a Budget that is constructive, positive and forward looking. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has put forward an interesting Budget. It comes at an important time for our country, because on 29 March next year we will leave the European Union. We need him to be upbeat and confident about our future; I certainly am. I believe that Britain will thrive post Brexit. The dynamism and innovative people we have in our country should allow us a great future. I welcome the Chancellor’s upbeat analysis and believe passionately that the measures in the Budget will help us to make Britain a great country post Brexit. The Leader of the Opposition had nothing constructive to say, and nor did the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for the Scottish nationalists, who gave us more of a rant than a policy discussion.

My constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford are really keen that austerity should come to an end. It is coming to an end and they welcome the fact that—

[Interruption.] It is no good those on the shadow Front Bench chuntering. They have no policies and no idea. They got us into this mess. If it was not for the mismanagement of the last Labour Government, we would not have had the years of austerity that we have had.

There has been careful fiscal management and the solid economic recovery proves that austerity is coming to an end. I welcome that. No one on the Opposition had. I welcome that. No one on the Opposition had.

Sir David Evennett: The hon. Lady did not listen. I said that incomes are going up ahead of inflation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): She did listen.

Sir David Evennett: It is no good those on the Opposition Benches has highlighted the fact that economic growth has been revised up, employment is up and growing all the time and wages are rising above inflation. That is positive economic news.

Meg Hillier: I cannot stay sat down when the right hon. Gentleman talks about wages rising, when rents are going up way higher than wage inflation, if it exists; it does not exist for many of my constituents.

Sir David Evennett: The hon. Lady did not listen. I said that incomes are going up ahead of inflation.

Wes Streeting: That is a bit of wishful thinking.

Sir David Evennett: No, it is not wishful thinking. It is fact. The hon. Gentleman would not have a clue about economics.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have a subplot going on.

Sir David Evennett: The NHS is much loved, much valued and so important to everybody in this country. In June, the Prime Minister set out her commitment to a fully funded cash settlement for the NHS, which equates to £20.5 billion more in real terms by 2023-24 and an average growth rate in the NHS budget of 3.4% a year. That is really positive.

We heard from the Chancellor today that £2 billion more will go into mental health. Mental health has always been the Cinderella service of the national health service, but we are taking it seriously now, and we should do, because so many people in our society need help. I pay tribute to my local mental health trust, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust. Further funding will be committed to ensure that there is parity of esteem between mental and physical health services, which is positive news. It means that anyone experiencing a crisis can call the NHS, and there will be more mental health ambulances and increased community support and comprehensive support at every major A&E by 2024. That is positive news, and it should be welcomed by the whole House. We should not put that down as something that is not positive.

The Government have announced £240 million of additional funding for councils to spend on adult social care services, to reduce pressures on the NHS this winter. Over £900,000 has been made available to meet the needs in Bexley, which was widely welcomed across my borough, not only because we think it will be necessary, but because it shows a positive commitment from the Government to do what is right for the health service.

There are many other measures, and although time is rather short, regrettably, I want to mention one or two of them. The fact is that a lot people not earning a lot of money always have to pay too much tax on their income, because the threshold at which they start to pay tax is too low. Today, we have seen a commitment by the Chancellor, from next April, to meet our commitment in the manifestos of 2015 and 2017 to a threshold of £12,500 before people start paying tax and to a higher rate threshold of £50,000. That is a real improvement compared with what people had to pay tax on in 2010. It is positive news all round on that front as well.

The other matter I want to mention is local councils. In Bexley, we have one of the best councils in London and it manages its affairs very satisfactorily, but obviously they are all strapped for cash. We have seen today that there is more money for roads, which is popular with my constituents because of the potholes. We had a bad winter and road surfaces have suffered accordingly. Road maintenance is a real issue locally, particularly, as I say, after last winter. There is also extra money from the Government to improve junctions on local roads. In Bexley, we have some problems with junctions and this money will obviously help. Most important of all are the motorways. We in Bexley have a rather poor rail service. We in Bexley have a rather poor rail service with Southeastern. We have no underground. I was a little disappointed that we are not looking to have an extension of Crossrail to Ebbsfleet, but I shall have to push the Treasury Bench more about that in future. However, roads have been neglected and the money going in will help our network across the country.

I also welcome the Government’s commitment to resolve the FOBTs situation, but I am a little disappointed that this is not coming in until next October. It is very important and I have campaigned quite intensively with a number of Opposition Members and Government Members too on the maximum stake being reduced.
6.53 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): For all the cheering, for all the waving of papers and for all the talk of this being a great Budget, the word that comes out of the Office for Budget Responsibility book is “uncertainty.” Uncertainty about where we are going in terms of budget forecasts with Brexit coming. As we go into a death spin that will bring about a no-deal Brexit, the question we have to ask ourselves, and the Chancellor has certainly not asked himself, is: is this economy strong enough should we have a no-deal Brexit? It seems to me, from reading its book, that the OBR is deeply concerned that many of its estimates could be thrown out.

I have to chide the Government for this. They have not provided the information that was asked for. When the OBR has asked for information, it has been referred to the Florence speech by the Prime Minister and to the Chequers deal. I have to say, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee—I am delighted that our Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who is a fantastic Chair, has spoken in our debate, and she will tell the House this as well—that we face the same thing all the time from Government Departments. We are not getting the information we need, so we do not know whether Departments are ready to face the challenges of Brexit.

Let us have a look: is the economy strong enough? We have to congratulate the Chancellor on having the bare-faced cheek to stand at the Dispatch Box and brag about growth figures, when he is the first Chancellor to come to the House and declare that growth is going to be under 2%. Does that mean that we would be ready for the shock of Brexit? I think not.

Further to that, the Government have said that their top priority is productivity. We all know that productivity has still not recovered to its pre-crash levels. It is lower than at any time since 1945 and it does not seem to be growing.

What does that mean in the real economy? It means that wages are down and that fiscal policy is cut back to the bone. If we do face another recession, and the OBR says there is a one in two chance of that happening, we cannot rely on the fiscal policy tools we have used in the past—interest rates are too low and there could be a rise in inflation. That means that we might have to use unusual practices to get out of the next recession. Again, we do not feel ready.

It is all very well talking about the economy in terms of figures; what does it mean to constituents such as mine in Islwyn tonight? It means that, if they are a victim of a crime, it is less likely that the police will come and investigate—that is not through any fault of their own, but simply because they have been cut to the bone. There are now fewer police officers than there were in 2010—in real terms, 21,000 fewer—and did we hear a penny piece on regular policing from the Chancellor today? No, we did not. At the same time, we recently learned in the Public Accounts Committee that the police funding formula is wrong. The Home Office does not know how to bring about change. For three years, it has said that it wants to change the formula, but still there is no change.

Furthermore, for a small business that has been set up in Blackwood or Oakdale as an internet retailer, it is a slap in the face when they see large internet companies getting away without paying their tax. VAT evasion on online sales is costing this country £1 billion to £1.5 billion a year—not my figures, but those of the independent National Audit Office—and, again, the response is piecemeal.

I know that the Tory Chancellor must play to the gallery and must therefore talk about defence, but we have found out that there is a £3 billion shortfall in the MOD budget. Again, that figure is from the National Audit Office. This country is not equipped to face the challenges of the future.

For ever and a day since I entered this House eight years ago, we have talked about investing in infrastructure. It is all very well investing in infrastructure, but those of us who sit on the Public Accounts Committee have seen the waste. Recently, we have learnt that the budget for the electrification of the London to Swansea line overrun by £1.2 billion and it was cancelled and not a single rail line was laid. That is £1.2 billion not of Government money but of taxpayers’ money. That could have been used in health and social services. I know of other projects where we are overrunning. The Government are failing to get a grip on procurement and managing projects. Just look at Carillion and Capita. They are all having problems and the Government need to get a grip on this. It is all very well making announcements, but there has to be some attention to detail to ensure that these contracts are managed correctly day to day, which they are not.

It would be remiss of me not to mention universal credit. The roll-out of universal credit is hitting my constituency extremely hard. The five-week waiting period is causing untold misery. The problem is that the Government do not see the wider issue. They do not see the effect of debt, the growth of food banks and the decline in people’s health—not just of those who are on universal credit but, through stress and sickness, of those who have to administer it.

Chris Philp: On universal credit, has the hon. Gentleman seen the Resolution Foundation’s report, published after the Budget statement this afternoon, which says that with today’s changes universal credit will actually pay out more money in total than the old system that it replaces?
Chris Evans: I invite the hon. Gentleman to my surgery on Friday, when several people will come to see me about universal credit. That is happening right now. Look into those people’s eyes and tell them universal credit is giving people more money. Come to my constituency and see the poverty. Come with me to Risca Salvation Army food bank. Then say there is more money. People are struggling now. We can talk about this Budget in figures all we want, but people are suffering; they are in poverty now. If universal credit is an example of anything, it is of this Tory Government’s coldness.

The absolute worst example I can give is of when DWP officials came before the PAC and played deaf to the idea that people are struggling. They felt the policy was going forward. They made uncertain promises, saying that 200,000 were going to work. There was no way to measure these things. It is utterly amazing to me that the Secretary of State comes to the House and, standing at the Dispatch Box, questions the independent NAO’s figures in the report. It is shameful.

It is all right waving the flag and saying, “Austerity is over” but, for so many people tonight, in my constituency and throughout the country, austerity has not ended. In 2010, the Tories came to power with a mandate for change. They said they would pay off the deficit. They said they would do something about the banking crisis. They said they would introduce universal credit. They have failed the country. The reason we are here now, talking about the problems in universal credit and they have failed the country. The reason we are here now, talking about the problems in universal credit and the poverty facing our constituents, is the political choice of austerity. The Tories made false promises. They thought there were simple solutions to complicated problems.

This Government have irreparably damaged this country. It will take generations to put that right. Slogans will not bring about change. We need a change of Government and a change of the system, and the sooner that happens, the better.

7.2 pm

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

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who made at least one point with which I strongly agree.

There are many ways of judging a Budget, and this Budget seems to me to have much to commend it, not least thanks to the hard work of the Governments since 2010 in ensuring that, today, we raise more income than we spend on our current account. I choose to judge the Budget by the extent to which it addresses the deep divisions in Britain today. I speak not only of Brexit, which hangs over everything, but the divisions between those who gain from globalisation and those who do not and who fear it.

I am especially concerned about intergenerational unfairness, which in Britain is exemplified in the ownership, renting and part-ownership of homes, which the Budget does something about. We see it also in the heavy burden on the younger generation of university fees, and of paying for the burgeoning elderly population. The younger generation increasingly do not see the benefits of free enterprise, a strong private sector and capitalism, because we Conservatives are not standing up properly for those things, so I was pleased to see the Chancellor do that to some extent today. Capitalism and free enterprise are not only about delivering white goods at the best possible price for those on average incomes. They are about protecting our freedoms and liberties.

The economic position in the west midlands is generally improving. When I was first the Member of Parliament for the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, the west midlands had the worst unemployment in the country; now, we have the fastest growing economy, and real progress is being made on new businesses and unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, which was extremely bad. That is in part because we have a strong and activist Birmingham chamber of commerce and a brilliant new Mayor, Andy Street, who is reinvigorating the system. However, the midlands engine, which I believe punches below its weight, needs stronger leadership and a bit more oomph.

The second matter I want to discuss has been mentioned by many hon. Members—universal credit. Everyone agrees that the reform is right in principle, but with experience of benefit reform in my time as a junior Social Security Minister between 1995 and 1997, I warn Ministers that they ignore the wisdom of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) at their peril. The cardinal rule governing benefit changes is not to use the change to take money away—to reduce the income of those on benefits and at the bottom of society. A Government can get away with a standstill position for the future or constrain increases, but they cannot reduce funding for what is already dependency income. Whenever the Treasury breaks that golden rule, ironically, it costs more. Some steps have been taken today in that respect, but we are not out of the woods yet. This important reform has some considerable way to go before the House can bless it.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I have been dissecting today’s announcements. Would my right hon. Friend be interested to know that a single parent not in receipt of housing benefit will see their work allowance improve from £397 to £492, but it will still not be where it should have been on pre-2015 figures, which is £734? That remains a massive gap. I do not think we have heard enough of the detail today.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend eloquently makes the point that a Government can have a standstill for future income when they reform benefits, but they cannot take benefits from some of the very poorest people in the way that, I fear, we were trying to do.

My third topic is that of tax fairness. We are in a period of high income tax, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) made clear. Some people have taxation at 60% on their income. It is worth remembering that throughout the period of Conservative-led Government, since 2010, people in income tax have paid more every year than in any year in which Labour was in power. However, points have been well made, including by the hon. Member for Islwyn, about the way the giants of the tech world are avoiding their fair dues. For example, Amazon, on £2 billion of sales, pays only £4.6 million tax, Google, on £5.7 billion of sales, pays only £15 million tax, and Facebook on £5.1 billion of sales pays only £840 million through the “double Irish” or the “double Dutch” tax
avoidance schemes. That is quite wrong, and I am glad the Government are going to start to rectify that. It would be better if it were rectified through OECD agreement across the piece, which was of course the subject of the British G8 conference, at which taxation reform and transparency and the importance of paying tax where revenue is earned were strongly supported. There was strong British leadership on that subject, and we need more of it. Also, the effect of digital platforms on town centres is important in areas such as mine. Royal Sutton Coldfield is suffering grievously from the rapid changes in Britain’s high streets, so the measures announced today are welcome.

The fourth and final area I wanted to mention today is the spending on mental health, which is very welcome indeed. We must ensure that this is genuinely incremental spending that buys new and expanded services. On 25 November 2015, George Osborne, in his spending review, mentioned the work that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), Alastair Campbell and I were doing as part of the all-party group on mental health services. He pledged that for young people, particularly girls, there would be an increase of £600 million. That was very welcome, but the money, to our great sorrow and irritation, went mainly to pay-off overspends in the system and very little genuinely made its way to the frontline as we had hoped. I hope that the Treasury will keep a very close eye on how this new money is spent to ensure it goes straight to the frontline.

The £20 billion increase in spending on the NHS is enormously welcomed by all of us, but I remind the House of the autobiography of Tony Blair, in which he singles out the fact that the extra money new Labour put into the public services did not lead to the reforms they wanted when they put the money in. He refers to the marks on his back from the difficulties of public sector reform. We must be sure that we really get the gains for our constituents that this enormous amount of extra money should bring, and address the ongoing issues relating to how public services are funded.

The burden of funding the NHS in the future, which above all will go to helping and caring for the elder generation, must not only fall on the income tax of working people to pay for asset-rich retired people. In spite of the very significant political problems of confronting this issue, we must ensure we do not make the intergenerational unfairness, which is so keenly felt by many of our younger constituents, worse by funding the NHS in the future in that way.

7.11 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): We have an unusual Halloween Budget. Rarely have our country’s prospects been so fragile and in the balance. Rarely has any Budget come at a time of such domestic political uncertainty, with a weak and faltering Prime Minister who cannot even command her own Cabinet. Rarely has a Budget come at a time of such radical economic uncertainty, caused by the Conservative party’s flailing attempts to agree with itself on what an acceptable Brexit deal might actually look like, let alone to conclude an agreement with the EU27.

Perhaps the Chancellor had pencilled in today’s date for the Budget assuming that the outlines of a deal with the EU would have been nailed down by now—after all, there are only five months to go before Brexit is due to happen. Perhaps he had been planning to use the Budget to spend his mythical Brexit dividend in the glowing aftermath of an agreement reached at the October European Council. But all too predictably, he has been undone by the chronic inability of the Prime Minister to make a decision and the kamikaze tendencies of the Brextemists in his own party who wish to take the country over a cliff by engineering a disorderly no deal Brexit.

That renders today’s Budget contingent on a deal and irrelevant if there is no deal, as the Chancellor himself has admitted. The Chancellor has also been hemmed in by the Prime Minister’s surprise announcement of the end of austerity in her conference speech. We on the Opposition Benches would like this dramatic news to be true, but since the Government have made this announcement three times before and done nothing to bring it about, we are very sceptical. In fact, we think it is more likely that “Nothing has changed”.

This Budget has come after eight years of massive cuts in public expenditure. It began with the coalition Government’s economic policy focusing on deficit reduction above all other considerations. That deliberate political choice has got the deficit down, but at a huge cost for millions of people in this country. In eight years, it has profoundly changed the nature of our society for the worse. It has turbo-charged inequality, creating massive and accelerating differences between the super-rich and the rest. It has caused untold misery for the millions who have been left to cope alone with life’s misfortunes, as the social security system has been eviscerated around them, the social care system has been allowed to disintegrate, and child poverty has soared. That was neither necessary nor inevitable, and it must be abandoned.

When he embarked on this course in 2010, the then Chancellor George Osborne announced that we were “all in this together”. He then made a series of political choices which achieved the opposite of that assertion. He announced that 80% of the deficit reduction would come from cuts to public expenditure and 20% from tax increases. That 80:20 ratio signalled an original intention to hit the vulnerable, but the reality proved to be even worse. He gifted £100 billion of tax cuts to the rich and the corporations, which means that all of the deficit reduction has actually been achieved by deep and damaging cuts to public expenditure—100% of it.

The Government have torn asunder our social fabric, destroying social justice and fairness because they chose to do so. The result has been the longest wage freeze for 200 years, with real wages not expected to recover their previous value for 17 years. As the TUC rightly points out, 8.2 million working adults are now in poverty, child poverty is soaring, and £45 billion has been cut from vital public services. The Government have used the global financial crisis to destroy the state’s capacity to create opportunity, fairness and security because they chose to let their damaging belief in market fundamentalism rip. And they still believe. No end of speeches about the “just about managing” will change the political reality of the choices the Government have made and what the consequences have been.

The Government have created a nastier, meaner society where the rich and privileged can operate untouched by scruple, easily able to escape their obligations to pay their fair share of tax. The Government have fashioned an economy where wealth is extracted not created, as
obscene levels of executive pay continue to go unchecked. At the same time, they have mandated real-terms cuts in public sector pay for nurses, firefighters and the police, and slashed payments for those who must rely on benefits to survive. The poorer the local authority area, the deeper have been the cuts. Foodbank use has soared, with 1.3 million food parcels handed out last year. Homelessness has risen; insecurity and suffering have grown.

The Equality Trust recently revealed that the richest 1,000 people in the UK have increased their wealth by £66 billion in the past year alone, and that their total wealth is now a massive £724 billion. That is significantly more than the poorest 40% of people in this country own between them. As the Equality Trust rightly points out, the capture by a tiny number of people of this vast amount of our nation’s wealth is economically illiterate, socially poisonous and politically unsustainable. As Thomas Piketty proves in his book “Capital in the Twenty-First Century”, because the return to capital is now greater than economic growth, this obscene concentration of wealth can only be stopped by the application of wealth taxes and the ending of the escape route of tax havens.

This is now the economically efficient thing to do. It is also the moral thing to do. Without such action, wealth will just continue to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands, and democracy will give way to plutocracy and populism. In fact, there are many alarming signs that the transformation away from free and democratic societies has already begun. Yet today we have seen little more than lip service paid to a small part of this urgent agenda by this disappointing Budget from a Chancellor and a Government that just do not get it.

7.17 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for letting me speak on the first day of the Budget debate. I am slightly disappointed, if I may be honest, to be speaking on the first day, but as there is not a day allocated to foreign affairs and defence, I have taken the opportunity to speak today. I hope the House will forgive me if I focus a little bit on foreign affairs. Like most of us, I welcome the extra resources going to the Ministry of Defence to ensure that the programmes agreed in the 2015 defence review are carried out, but at this moment of immense strategic change, when not only the United Kingdom but the world is changing from multilateralism to bilateralism in many of the largest countries—I am thinking, of course, particularly of the United States and China—it is a little surprising that we did not hear mention of the Foreign Office from a former Foreign Secretary.

What is perhaps more surprising is that we do not see the increase in the Foreign Office budget that is so necessary. Increases to Foreign Office budgets can sound very large in percentage terms, but they look like rounding errors when compared to spending on defence, international development and especially health and social welfare. I hope that the absence from the Government Front Bench of a phrase on foreign affairs today was not reflective of the thought that it is not something to talk about, but rather that greater thought needs to go into our strategic laydown, our strategic engagement and the position of the United Kingdom in the years to come. At the very least, one could have argued for a small mention for Foreign and Commonwealth Office pay, which in some cases is as much as 20% behind other Departments. However, this is a day not for parochial—or indeed, international—appeals, but for talking about the Budget as a whole. I welcome the opportunity to do so, because the Budget addressed some fundamental things that I see as the beginning of the message that this party, and this Parliament, need to push back on and make clear.

The first is fairness, which we need to talk about more radically and more informatively. We have heard often, and quite rightly in many cases, about fairness in welfare. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) highlighted very powerfully fairness in universal credit and for those who are most in need, and I agree with him entirely, but other aspects of fairness have not been touched on, and they are equally important. One of these is the increase in the minimum wage and the living wage that we have seen since 2010. It has been an enormous rise, almost double the rate of inflation, and it has gone a hell of a long way to increasing fairness in work. We all know that in-work poverty is still a challenge, so increasing pay and fairness for those who are working, striving and doing their bit is fundamental to a Conservative principle, and I am glad that the Chancellor reflected that.

I am also glad that he reflected that in announcing a digital tax, because this is something on which—I cannot believe I am saying this—I agree with the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). The whole point about rentier economies is that they become very destructive and undermining. This is about addressing some of those so-called FANGs—Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, and Google—and the fact that over a few years, they have acquired the controlling the nature of an economy and the best programmers and engineers, then rewarded them with share options and tax schemes that effectively mean nobody can else can afford to hire them. They have taken over a rent-generating state in much the same way as other industries did in times past. Therefore, I am addressing that through taxation—the Chancellor has begun to do that, but it really does require a global response—is an essential part of reforming the economy, so that we can get back to what Conservative Members fundamentally believe in, which is that business is good for the economy when it liberates and empowers, when it is competitive, and when it sees aspiration, enterprise and innovation. That is not the same as the overwhelming control of a few businesses and individuals, and that is a danger that we have come to.

I was very pleased, therefore, to see that included, particularly as I have the great privilege of representing three of the finest towns in the country—Edenbridge, Tonbridge and West Malling—all of which are blessed with the wonderful county of Kent and all of which are struggling with their high streets, because they are being challenged, as others are, by organisations off the high street. It is true that the nature of high street shopping is changing, and that deliveries and online shopping have made life enormously easier for us—I speak as the father of two very young children, and my wife works as many hours as I do. The two of us, like so many in our generation, rely on the ability to have goods delivered, so I am not going to condemn the
online economy. However, we have to recognise that the high street has a place in our community and not just our economy. Part of our identity as people is to come from a community where we can shop together and be together and understand that actually, it ain’t all about the cash. That is a phenomenally important part of the Chancellor’s Budget today.

The Chancellor also put forward a few other things, and forgive me if I touch on one very personally. The last issue I want to talk about is his commitment to veterans’ welfare. Many Members will know that I came to this place straight after serving in the military. I am very proud of that service, but I am also very saddened by some things that I have seen in the years since. There was a report in The Sunday Times—I do not know how many Members read it—about the number of suicides among our veterans. What the Chancellor is doing in recognising that veterans’ mental health is a particular issue is extremely important. However, what he did not touch on, and I will press this point, is going further and saying, “Look, this is not simply the duty of the state. It is not simply up to the Ministry of Defence or the Army.” When I returned from Iraq in 2003, I remember that what I missed was not a psychiatrist or professional help. What I missed—what I failed to get initially—was understanding from wider society, and that left me feeling angry, cut off and isolated. I was lucky; I was blessed—I had friends who saw that this was not going well and family who surrounded me with love and supported me through what was a very trying time. However, this is a duty on all of us. The Chancellor nodded towards the direction of the state’s responsibility, and I welcome that, but this is something that we as a House, as communities and as a nation have to do together.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this evening, so after the next speaker, I have to reduce the time limit to six minutes. That does not apply to Christine Jardine.

7.26 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Now we have heard it from the Chancellor and the Prime Minister: austerity is over. It is a nice thought, but it will be down to our constituents and those outwith this place to decide whether they have achieved it. Every week, I meet people whose lives have been and are still being damaged by austerity. Today, like us, they have been told exactly what this Government mean when they tell us that it is over. Right now, people up and down the country will be working out the impact of this Budget on their income, their food bills and whether it means that they have reached the light at the end of the dark tunnel that began with the financial crash more than a decade ago in 2008.

I suspect that they will be as disappointed as we are to be promised growth at less than 2% for five years. With Brexit weighing down the economy and the big issues that have not been tackled, today’s Budget does not fulfil even the minimum definition of ending austerity as laid out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. That would cost £19 billion a year on top of the Government’s NHS commitment. Instead of that, we got more for potholes than for schools, nothing for women born in the 1950s and facing pension inequality, and a pathetic, inadequate sticking plaster for universal credit. So much more should, and could, be possible, but for Brexit. Just think of the £500 million that the Chancellor allocated on today to the £3 billion that has previously been allocated for no-deal preparations—what could that have done for our public services?

What we needed today was vision, renewal and a way to reboot not just our beleaguered economy, but our damaged society. Instead, we got that sticking plaster. By March, if some of the Chancellor’s Brexitee buddies have their way, this plan may have to be torn up and a fresh fag packet found to write a new one on.

This autumn, we are undoubtedly seeing short-term improvements in the economic picture, but there are still worrying trends that the Government have failed to tackle. Their independent advisory body, the Office for Budget Responsibility, has warned that the whole period of the Brexit negotiations is so disquieting and clouded in uncertainty that it is unable to assess the impact.

What a thought that is. We are faced with so much ambiguity and the threat of chaos looms so large that the body whose one role is to assess the economy is unable to do so.

While the Government suddenly seem to have discovered £13 billion from somewhere, we all know that finding some money down the back of the sofa may well help with Christmas, but it will not pay the bills for the coming year. What we do not need now is a quick fix for the short term—a slapdash cover-up job. Today, the country needed a Chancellor who would lay out how we would go about repairing the severe damage that austerity has done, who would fix our broken tax system, and most importantly of all, who would find a way to restore a social contract that many struggling at the lower end of the income scale feel has been thrown on the fire, along with their ambitions for their and their family’s future. The very people the Prime Minister promised to support in her first statement on the steps of Downing Street are still waiting for the fulfilment of that commitment.

We need a people’s Budget that lays out a progressive way ahead for the 21st century; a Budget that protects the economy by allowing a people’s vote on the final deal with the EU and thereby allowing people to opt for an exit from Brexit; a Budget that fixes our broken tax system to boost investment and ensure the wealthiest individuals and big businesses pay their fair share; a Budget that invests this money in communities by reversing school cuts, putting more police on the streets and properly funding—yes, properly funding—universal credit. To ensure an end to austerity, we would need that cash injection of £19 billion and universal credit would need £3 billion, instead of £1 billion over five years.

In 1909, Lloyd George laid the foundations of what became the welfare state in his Budget and wrote the first page of the modern social contract with the introduction of employment insurance. A century later and universal credit, the descendant of that policy, is at the heart of the change we needed from this Budget. It is almost unique among Government policies: there is near universal support for the original principle of simplifying benefits and helping people get back into work, but the condemnation of how it has been implemented is almost as widespread.
Universal credit is to be rolled out in my constituency for the first time next month, and we are braced for its impact. Experience elsewhere tells us to expect people waiting weeks longer than expected for payments, problems with rent arrears because of late payments, people facing increased stress and mental health issues, and so much more. It could have been avoided had the Government paused the roll-out to fix the problems and had the Chancellor announced that he was re-investing the £3 billion taken out of the system. Reinventing that money would allow people to earn more before their benefits are reduced, which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said would make a difference. Instead, we have the £1 billion over five years.

Elsewhere our public services need investment, and this should come from reforming our tax system so that it fairly taxes wealth and not just income. If the Chancellor had grasped that nettle today, he could have begun the process of healing the country and really ending austerity, but once again he has simply put off the day when we all pay the price of that broken social contract. The way things are now are not how they have to be. The Liberal Democrats demand better.

7.32 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

I welcome today’s Budget. It helps working people, businesses and communities across my constituency—the strivers, the grafters and the carers, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor called them—but, more importantly, it prepares our country for the fourth industrial revolution. As my hon. and gallant Friend the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) rightly said, the country is currently experiencing radical change, at the same time as the geopolitics of the world are being transformed. Alongside those geopolitical, military and defence issues, however, are dramatic and profound economic issues affecting how we live our lives, how our country operates and how our society will function in the years ahead. I welcome the Budget not only because it addresses the challenges of today but because it prepares our country to seize the opportunities of the future.

The measures in the Budget are to be delivered on a foundation of economic success and growth. With growth revised up from 1.3% to 1.6%, rising employment, wages set to rise every year for the next five years, the deficit down and national debt as a share of GDP also falling, the economic foundations are very strong, but let us be clear: we are confronting profound changes in the way our society and economy work. The fourth industrial revolution is the next and more accelerated chapter of globalisation, and as globalisation accelerates, we in the House and the Government have to be in a position to equip our people to seize those opportunities and meet those challenges.

On behalf of working people in my constituency and across the country, I welcome the measures in the Budget that cut income tax and help working people to keep more of the money they earn. I welcome the rise in the living wage, the freezing of fuel duty and the roll-out of the 26-30 railcard. All these measures will help people, communities and businesses in my constituency and across the country.

More importantly, the big long-term challenge facing this country is to improve our productivity and seize the opportunities of new technologies in this fourth industrial revolution. Only by improving productivity will we create new jobs and ensure that wages rise and more businesses open, so I welcome the investment in the skills, infrastructure and businesses that will drive this new technological revolution. The increase in the national productivity investment fund to £37 billion will give us the financial firepower to invest in our road, rail and digital infrastructure, while the £200 million pilot to ensure our schools and rural areas benefit from broadband is also welcome.

Hidden away in the Red Book is something else I welcome: the consultation on megabit connectivity for our new homes and ensuring that no community, region or nation of the country is left behind as others charge ahead. If we want this new industrial revolution to create jobs and prosperity, everybody in every part of our country, in every community, region and nation, must be able to share in that new prosperity, but they will only do so if they are connected to the new digital economy of the future.

I particularly welcome the investment in artificial intelligence, which is one of the driving, enabling technologies of the fourth industrial revolution. It will become pervasive—it will be a part of every industry, sector and business—and, combined with automation, big data and other new technologies, will drive forward Britain’s innovative capacity, so I welcome the £50 million allocated to the new Turing artificial intelligence fellowships and the £100 million for international fellowships to bring the brightest and the best to this country. Combined with the new centre for data ethics and innovation and the office for artificial intelligence, this will enable Britain to become a true powerhouse in AI. By investing in it early, Britain can not only get to the future but get there first.

It is important that every community in the country be equipped to seize the opportunities of new technology and benefit from the growth it will bring, which is why I welcome the £120 million Strength in Places fund. It will support the growth of new science and technology clusters around the country, complementing the great work of our local economic partnerships and universities and making sure that start-ups become scale-ups. If Britain is to retain its place as one of the best countries in the world to start and grow a business, we need to make sure our entrepreneurs have the financial firepower and support from the Government to grow their businesses, so I welcome the extension of the start-up loan scheme and the entrepreneurship mentoring that will be available to them, as well as the implementation of the first three T-levels.

If we want the fairer society that right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, we need to involve everyone in this new technological revolution so that everyone can seize those opportunities and take up those new jobs. Having the right skills at the right time is important, which is why funding the new national retraining scheme in partnership with the CBI and the trade union movement is incredibly important. It is by investing in skills, jobs and new technologies that businesses such as iRed and
Dream 3D in my constituency, which my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary will see when he comes to my constituency in a few weeks, can really turbocharge our economy.

In conclusion, I welcome this Budget because it prepares Britain for the economy of the future by investing in the skills, infrastructure and jobs to create the high-wage, high-skilled economy we all want.

7.38 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): First, I thank the Chancellor for his announcement on orphan waste sites—a proposal I made to the Government six months ago. The Chancellor accidentally forgot to mention that, although I am sure it will not be missed out in the summing up. How quickly will that resource be available? Is it a good, sensible move by the Government.

Secondly, on the security for Jewish schools, despite some people on the left describing this only very recently as political posturing, it is evident to everyone that it is a requirement. Am I right to presume—I am sure that I am—that should the demands and requirements increase, they will be met? Was that built into the Chancellor’s assumptions? What he said about maintaining money for security in Jewish schools was very welcome.

Let me now make some observations about matters that were not in the Budget, but should have been. Perhaps the biggest single omission was not the environmental case for a dream economy—which has been made, although it has not convinced everyone—but the economic case. For every barrel of oil that we import, 20 years ago we were exporting two. Today, 56% of our gas comes from abroad, Russia being the biggest provider.

In the context of national security, but also in the context of our economy, our failure to invest in future technologies, particularly green technologies, will come back to haunt us. There is one obvious example. Currently, the only serious investment in geothermal energy—a mere £10 million—is being made by the Coal Authority in a former colliery in south Wales. Geothermal energy is a possibility under half the north of England and under all my constituency, but we have not devised the technology to make it cost-effective, although there are vast amounts of boiling water underground that we could be using. As there is no import requirement, the impact on the balance of payments is also very significant economically.

The same applies to use of the planning systems. There is a mania on both sides of the House for building more houses, but we are not enforcing green technology on house builders. Where we have the greenest green housing possible—prefabricated housing—there is no financial support to get the industry moving. Areas like mine would be happy to have 1,000 prefabricated bungalows or new starter homes: they would be filled for rent, and they would be sold immediately. The benefits of their efficiency, and their effect on the balance of payments as well as the environment, would be huge and permanent for the economy. That is a huge omission, and the Labour party needs to catch up with it as well.

There is one issue that people do not seem to be prepared to raise. I am not convinced that we can solve the requirements of the NHS and social care without increasing taxation. There is plenty of talk about how the rich will be taxed and how money will be grabbed from overseas; I totally endorse that, but I am waiting to hear the details of precisely how that will be done and how much money will the announcement of a load their money about, and gaining that tax from the very wealthy will not be straightforward.

It seems to me that we, as a Parliament, are being dishonest with the British people when it comes to health and social care. What they want—permanent certainty about the future of both those services—will require a tax increase, and not just a tax increase for a small part of the population. We should spell that out, and if we do not agree with the tax increase, there will not be all-embracing social care, or a world-leading national health service. There will be a health service that will do OK. It will be pretty good, but it will not be world leading. I do not think that that is good enough, and it is not what I believe in.

Quantitative easing has created more profits and dividends for shareholders, and many economists have suggested “helicopter money” as an alternative. There is a very simple way to bring helicopter money into the economy: a one-off pay increase, which would have the same economic impact. There is likely to be a discussion about more quantitative easing in the near future if the economy goes down, but a better alternative would be a one-off pay rise for British workers.

7.44 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). He spoke of the importance of prefabricated housing. He is welcome to come and see a plant that makes them in Alfreton, in my constituency, if he is keen to do so.

I came to the House today expecting a bit of a non-event of a Budget, given our present tight fiscal situation. A large amount of NHS spending has already been announced; there is the uncertainty of Brexit; and there will be a spending review next year. There was not much room for the Chancellor to say anything particularly exciting. I was expecting the announcement of a few consultations and a few small spending commitments, important but not, in the scheme of things, very material. However, the Chancellor announced some quite significant amounts of spending. It seemed that what he was trying to do was signal a coming end to austerity. As can be seen in the Red Book, he announced £11 billion of extra spending in 2019-20, and a £4 billion tax cut in the same year. That is an extra £15 billion worth of fiscal loosening in the next financial year, and it will rise to £39 billion by the end of the Red Book period. It constitutes a significant reduction in austerity, and it allows for a fair number of measures that my constituents will probably welcome.

The rise in the living wage, for instance, will be of great interest to my constituents. The increase in the personal allowance to £12,500 and the rise in the higher-rate allowance to £50,000 next year will mean a £130 tax cut for basic-rate taxpayers and take 1 million people out of the higher tax rate. That is a promise for which I have been campaigning for many years, and one that we made in our last manifesto. Its coming into force in less than six months will send a real signal that we are on the side of those hard-working people, and that they can keep more of the money that they earn.
While we are on the subject of taxes, let me say that probably the single biggest issue that is raised when I survey my constituents is tax avoidance and, in particular, the way in which the rich and the large global companies avoid paying the sums that they ought to pay. I therefore give a cautious welcome to the announcement of a digital services tax. However, I share the concern of others about exactly how we can make it work—how we can define income so that we catch the companies that we want to catch, without catching the online sales of high street businesses such as Tesco or John Lewis. I appreciate the commitment not to do that, but I think it is quite hard to get the definitions right and actually get money out of those global businesses. I sense that probably the only way to do it is to try to tax their sales. Computing a profit-equivalent calculation of those sales and taxing that might serve as a compromise. However, I think that the only money that we actually see in the UK is the money that our consumers are paying to buy goods or services from those companies, and trying to secure more tax from that cash flow is probably the only effective method.

We want to use that money to support our high streets. There are three towns in my constituency, and there are several villages with high streets. They are all showing the standard signs of decline: empty shops, charity shops and bookmakers, for example. Anything that we can do to encourage more retailers, such as the business rate reduction and the money for the future high street, will be hugely welcome. However, we must be realistic. A few more glossy plans drawn up by councils around the country without the money to implement them will not bring about the change that is needed. We must accept the need to redesign some of those high streets fundamentally and to allow more residential development. If we have to move some businesses around to create a viable business area, do some compulsory purchasing and find the funds to bring about regeneration and get building use changed, I think that that is the only way in which we can really halt the decline, and I hope that it is part of the plan that we are expecting.

I also welcome some of the one-off funding that was announced, such as the funding for schools. In principle, I am not sure that one-off funding that is not sustained is a particularly brilliant way to finance schools, but I think that they will welcome the chance to do the few bits of extra capital spending for which they are struggling to find funds. Any money for potholes must be hugely welcome: concern is often expressed about the state of our roads. If we have to move some businesses around to create a viable business area, do some compulsory purchasing and find the funds to bring about regeneration and get building use changed, I think that that is the only way in which we can really halt the decline, and I hope that it is part of the plan that we are expecting.

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Let me, in the last couple of minutes available, commend the Chancellor for the money that he found to put back into universal credit. I have been calling for various measures, but I knew that the fiscal situation was tight, so we would not get everything that we wanted in this single Budget. I think it right to provide an extra £1,000 for the work allowance, which means an extra £630 for families who are in work. The extension to some of the transitional benefits of a couple of weeks for employment and support allowance and jobseeker’s allowance will be very helpful. There has not been any real mention of the reduction in the amount that has to be used from universal credit to pay back debts from 40% to 30%; that will be of huge use as well. This is not everything that needs to be done, but it is a great step forward and will help reassure my constituents that this benefit will work for them.

Overall, this is a positive Budget that goes further and does more than I hoped it possibly could. I do not think that it is the end of the story, and we will see how much more fiscal room we have next year to set out a future direction for spending and taxation, but I welcome the Budget and look forward to voting for it on Thursday.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): In a quest to not be churlish, I always try to find something to welcome in a Budget, even if it is a Conservative Budget. Clearly there are some changes to NHS expenditure and clearly the NHS requires that because we have an ageing society that requires much more investment. To the extent that the Chancellor has given some sort of commitment on that, that is welcome. But I have to say that the Budget is a missed opportunity in terms of the social care aspects of reform. We all know that some pretty fundamental decisions need to be taken on long-term funding of social care. It is a shame that the Chancellor has kicked that down the road.

It was really bad of the Chancellor not to mention climate change in his speech. He talked about plastics, which of course is very important, but it was an error not to mention climate change, especially since the scientists and the Committee on Climate Change so recently talked about the more immediate emergency that the world faces.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Leslie: I will not, if the hon. Lady does not mind, as many other Members want to get in and I want to be as brief as I can.

I would like there to have been more on homelessness. We will see whether the measures on universal credit have an effect, but I am not sure they will have enough of an effect. I would like to have seen further education and skills mentioned a lot more, too; it was not in the Budget statement as much as it should have been. Given the way the global economy is changing, we need to have some bold plans, such as to help people to retrain mid-career, as they go into their 40s, 50s and so forth—maybe a 20-week sabbatical or help with relocation costs. Let us have a bit of ambition on some of those things.

The key line on this Budget is on page 8 of the OBR document, which says that “the referendum vote to leave the EU appears to have weakened the economy.” That is quite an understatement by the OBR. The chart on page 9 that a Labour colleague pointed out earlier shows how Britain was towards the top of the G7 nations for growth but now has growth at an anaemic 1.5% or 1.6%, and it is predicted to be at that level for as far as the eye can see. That is a pitiful story; the OBR terms it “an unspectacular trajectory”.

There are similar ramifications from the referendum result. Business investment is poor. Sterling’s devaluation has hit incomes as well as consumption. Exports are performing badly and are predicted to perform badly
as well. The Chancellor is not just facing the referendum shadow that has been cast, but is in political limbo; he does not have a majority and perhaps that explains some of the lack of ambition he has shown in the Budget today. The OBR characterised it as “the familiar Augustinian pattern”— giveaways today but takeaways for tomorrow.

There are some hidden elements of the Budget that are very difficult, such as capital spending being cut consistently from 2019 onwards, which is on page 17 of the OBR report. Also, the deficit is actually going up and staying at about £20 billion a year. That is how the Chancellor has funded the change in funding for the national health service; in fact in many ways that is the big story of the Budget—the Government not going for a surplus but keeping that borrowing level persistently high.

However, the characterisation that there is some sort of Brexit dividend to come is what I find most offensive—the notion that as long as we avoid no deal everything is going to be rosy. The Treasury’s own figures have shown that on the Government’s favoured free trade agreement-type scenario our revenues will be £40 billion lower by 2030, with perhaps 6% less growth than we might otherwise have expected. Is this the sort of relationship that Britain deserves with the EU—being in that kind of what I think we should call Mexico or Colombia-style relationship? People call it a Canada-style relationship and everybody thinks, “Ah, maple syrup and maple leaves; this is a wonderful place.” But it is a sort of Algerian-style relationship with the EU, and it is not where we should be, because ultimately life outside the single market will cost us all a considerable amount more.

It is pathetic to think that the Chancellor today could make a judgment on the envelope for public spending going forward when he has not a clue what sort of Brexit relationship we are going to have after March next year. Indeed, the OBR says that “no meaningful basis” for forecasting can be made in its summing up on these issues. The notion of a dividend is blown out of the water by table 4.30, which clearly shows that the cost of the divorce bill and the anticipated extra spending in lieu of EU funding will be much higher than any notional savings from our not having to chip into the EU budget. Particularly when I hear about that ridiculous 50p coin, which of course will lose value literally as it is sitting in our pockets, I realise that the only way we can secure a better future is to let the public decide. That is why we should give them a people’s vote.

7.56 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie). He got off to a good start, but I was not too keen on his finish, but that expresses my feeling about what the Labour party has been saying about the Budget.

I welcome the Budget, which is set against a much more optimistic financial picture thanks to the good housekeeping of this Conservative Government and this Chancellor. We certainly are ending austerity and in doing so we must ensure that that does not indicate the end of prudence, because in our tax and spend policies we must continue to live within our means. That is exceedingly important. I am in danger of quoting the previous Chancellor by saying that we must prepare for any future inclement financial weather by fixing the roof while the sun is shining.

To spend approximately £110 billion more without really raising taxes is a fantastic trick for this Chancellor to have done, and much of this is attributable to the fantastic jobs record we have in this country. People are now earning more. There are over 3.3 million more people in jobs, they are paying taxes and wages are growing at the fastest pace in a decade. That is good news and I hope that Opposition Members will recognise that.

I also welcome other parts of the Budget: the move on personal allowances, which will, I think, be appreciated across the board; the freezing of fuel duty; and the announcement that we are going to make sure that those large digital companies pay the tax due in this country. That is significantly important.

There is also a small measure mentioned in the Red Book that is important. About 250 million meals every year are wasted and the Chancellor has announced that £15 million will go to charities and others to distribute that surplus food. That is important because we must not become a country of waste, particularly when we acknowledge that there are people in need.

I also welcome the measures to alleviate the stress on small businesses and shops, but I do have a problem: I am not sure what this measure will do for our small villages that are sometimes losing their only shop. In Seer Green in my constituency, we are losing the post office. It is too easy to convert a shop in a small village into residential property that will be worth an awful lot of money. I ask the Chancellor to look at that. Turning the only shop in a village into much more valuable housing accommodation removes the services from small communities that they need so badly.

Talking of shops, I want to go on to talk about my pet subject: HS2. I am worried about the shops in Great Missenden and elsewhere in my constituency that are going to suffer as HS2 goes forward. It will not have escaped the Chancellor’s notice that a delay has been announced in the notice to proceed on phase 1 of the construction. That is going to last until at least June 2019. The Budget contains good investments in roads, and I welcome the money announced for potholes, but the roads in my constituency are going to be very badly affected by HS2, which is already failing to comply with the environmental impact assessment. I do hope that we will not see the extra costs, delays and governance issues that we have seen emerging on Crossrail.

I welcome the money for schools. Schools are extremely important to us in Buckinghamshire, and I understand that there will be about £10,000 for each primary school and about £50,000 for each secondary school to help them with their capital budgets. I also want to talk about the £2 billion for mental health. Next year will be the anniversary of the Autism Act 2009, which I was privileged to bring in on a cross-party basis to try to support individuals with autism and their families. I hope we
can ensure that a good sum of that money will go towards helping families and individuals with autism. It is important that anyone in the public sector who is public-facing should be trained to understand autism and to create an environment in which people with autism can flourish.

I also welcome the funding for tree planting and environmental protection. HS2 is going to destroy an awful lot of ancient woodland. The new trees that the Chancellor will pay for will not replace that. However, they will go towards helping our environment, which needs protection, particularly from the large infrastructure projects, including the arc of innovation, as I call it, between Oxford and Cambridge. If we are going to have that arc of innovation, can we also ensure that we protect our countryside, and in particular the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty?

8.2 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): What has happened? Only last month, the Prime Minister told us that austerity was over, and at the beginning of the Chancellor’s speech, he told us that it was coming to an end, but the truth is that it is business as usual for austerity. There are 4 million children in poverty, and an end, but the truth is that it is business as usual for austerity. There are 4 million children in poverty, and an additional 1 million children in poverty as a consequence of cuts to social security and of universal credit in particular. I should like to refer to the Chancellor to the front page of the Morning Star, which outlines Labour’s 10 emergency Budget demands. They are to cut the five-week wait for universal credit; to remove the insistence on making and managing a claim online; to end counter-productive sanctions; to protect domestic abuse sufferers. / Interruption. / I know that Conservative Members find this funny, but I do not think it is funny at all. The demands include to protect domestic abuse sufferers; to allow families to split their universal credit payments; to protect families from homelessness and give tenants the right to have their housing costs paid directly to their landlord; to reverse the cuts to disabled people; to reverse the cuts to children’s care and services; to support people on fluctuating incomes; to restore work allowances; and to end the freeze on social security.

Over the past eight years, under this Tory Government—initially with their Liberal Democrat poodles—we have seen 500 children’s centres closing and, in the sixth richest nation on earth, 123,000 children living in temporary accommodation. We know that there is a £2 billion funding gap in children’s services and that there has been a 65% cut in youth services. The average tuition fee debt for people coming out of university is more than £50,000, and in the sixth richest nation on earth, rough sleeping has doubled in the past eight years. Social care needs are unmet for millions of older citizens, and 150,000 older citizens in our country are behind with their social care payments.

We have also seen the betrayal of the women involved in the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—the WASPI women—who so eloquently made their feelings known in the Public Gallery today. There is nothing in the Budget for them. We have seen 86% of the social security cuts falling on women, and 500 specialist women’s refuges closing since this Government came to power. A United Nations report has identified grave and systematic violations of disabled people’s rights. / Interruption. / I can see that some Members on the Conservative Benches are still laughing. They should be ashamed of themselves, not laughing.

Let me move on to the national health service, where 2.5 million people are waiting more than four hours in A&E. That figure was only 350,000 in 2010. More seriously, more and more people are dying while waiting for treatment, with 10,000 more people dying while waiting for treatment in the past five years. We know that the funding that has been announced will not fix that scandal. We also know that there are now 21,000 fewer police officers and 11,000 fewer firefighters.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that came out earlier this month talked about a potential climate catastrophe, but what is the Chancellor’s response? He has announced £10 million for fly-tipping and a plastics tax. It is pathetic. Since this Government came to power, we have seen a 56% cut in renewable energy investment. The Chancellor also had the temerity to talk about a jobs miracle. He is having a laugh! We have had the worst decade in history for pay rises. People are now £800 a year worse off on average than they were in 2010. He also had the gall to say that Labour’s programme would lead to an additional £1 trillion of debt. What a lot of nonsense. This Government have been borrowing for failure, and the sovereign debt is approaching £2 trillion. What we need is to recapture the spirit of 1945, when we invested to save and invested to create the national health service and build 1 million homes. We came out of that decade in a far better place than where we were when we entered it, and certainly than where we were in 1945.

This Government’s obsession with privatisation continues. It has been described by the International Monetary Fund, of all institutions, as a fiscal illusion. The Government are certainly making the wrong choices. They say that we cannot have public services without a dynamic economy, but that fails to acknowledge the fact that public services contribute to a dynamic economy. The Government need to get that message loud and clear. As for housing, this is not like the 300,000 houses that Harold Macmillan promised in 1951. We need a complete sea change in our approach, and a reversal of the millionaires’ tax cuts. We need public ownership to end rip-off capitalism, and the restoration of collective bargaining. In short, we need a Government who are prepared to invest in our economy, and to invest to save, instead of borrowing for failure.

8.8 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I should like to refer to several of the announcements before moving on to the welfare changes, for which I have been campaigning very hard. The Government’s prioritisation of NHS funding, especially for mental health, is very welcome. My local authorities will be relieved to hear that they will be able to apply for grants, but a long-term plan in the spending review next year cannot come soon enough. Cambridgeshire is one of the lowest funded counties in the country, and the social care and looked-after children’s services are at breaking point. We have applied again to be a pilot area for business rate retention, and I encourage Ministers to let us have this in the meantime.
Schools funding must also be addressed, because we still do not have fair funding in Cambridgeshire and we remain extremely poorly funded compared with other areas. I must confess that the offer of £400 million for those “little extras” did not sit well with me. We need textbooks and teaching assistants. We need the basics, never mind the little extras. If additional funding cannot be found, we must be braver and redistribute funds from areas that have been significantly better funded in the past. Even if the most perfect funding formula were introduced today, it would not deal with the decades of underfunding.

More positively, the £1.6 billion investment in technology will be essential to help us to navigate a potentially turbulent post-Brexit economy, because I do not share the optimism of others about a Brexit deal dividend. I can think of 101 things that I would rather spend £2 billion on, but I am pleased that we as a nation will lead the way by bringing in a digital services tax at long last. The fuel duty freeze and business rates relief for the high street will be welcomed, as will stamp duty relief for first-time buyers of shared ownership homes.

Turning to the area that I have campaigned hard on, numerous hon. Friends have shared my concerns about universal credit, its operations and its funding, and I urge colleagues to get into the detail of today’s announcement. The Red Book talks about “an extensive package of extra support for claimants as they make the transition to” U.C. I believe that the Chancellor suggested £1 billion, but I need to know what form that support will take. Is it transitional financial protection, or is it an extension of universal support for claimants who are transitioning?

The Red Book also mentions an additional fortnight’s worth of JSA, ESA and income support for those moving on to universal credit from July 2020. Is that for natural or managed migration claimants? The Government also propose to extend the payback period for advanced payment loans from 12 months to 16 months and to maximise the payback rate at 30% from 40%.

Some work allowances have been restored, but some still fall well short of what we had pre-2015. Investment of £1.7 billion cannot possibly undo the damage of a £3 billion cut. Claimants also in receipt of housing benefit will see slightly better work allowances than in 2015 but, given the benefit freeze, that is pretty much parity after four years. A single parent not claiming housing benefit, for example, will see their work allowance increase to £492 a month from £409, but that is still far short of the £734 it was pre-2015. Again, with no housing benefit, a single claimant with health conditions or a disability will see their work allowance increase from £409 to £492, but that is still far short of the original £647. Although the announcements are all welcome individually, they will only fix the symptoms, not the cause. We need to be honest and really sort out universal credit by restoring all work allowances for families with children or disabilities. We must also deal with the five-week initial wait—that is what will keep families out of food banks—and the advance loan payment should, as I have said before, instead become the actual first payment.

I do not wish to be ungrateful—I really do not—because the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have both welcomed today’s announcements. The improvements are of course welcome, but such is the scale of the challenges we still need to overcome to get universal credit right, both now and as we migrate legacy claimants across, there is still much more to do. My colleagues and I will need to hear more evidence that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury are listening before we will have confidence to vote for the regulations later this autumn. I of course welcome today’s investment in universal credit—I feel like a churlish teenager asking for more—and many of us have worked hard to achieve it. The Chancellor has listened and I am grateful, but I fear that it will still not be enough to keep universal credit out of the headlines, nor every family out of poverty.

8.13 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the gloom and doom of the Treasury’s predictions, it was pleasing that the Chancellor was able to start his speech today by blowing out of the water all the arguments being made by his own Department about the impact of the Brexit vote, our impending departure and the negotiations. Pay is growing in real terms, employment is up, the deficit is down, borrowing is going down, there is no more borrowing to cover current spending, and the Government are cutting taxes for 3 million people. The good news should be a warning to everyone—some Members have picked up on this already—who has perhaps fallen for the idea that the Treasury forecasts tell us that the economy will experience a downturn in the event of no Brexit deal and that there would have to be an emergency Budget. All the arguments we heard at the time of the referendum have not come to pass, and the Chancellor confirmed that today.

Today’s Budget is balanced and takes two things into consideration: that there are real problems to be addressed and that the Chancellor cannot be reckless. When the debt is such that the interest on it is the same as the total budgets for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, it is clear that we cannot keep borrowing and servicing that debt at the cost of money being available for services for public sector spending. The Chancellor has got the blend right in today’s Budget. I welcome the fact that he will take more people out of tax; the fact that he will go after those who are not paying their tax and after those who use a digital platform and currently have an advantage over those who pay rates on the high street; and the fact that small businesses will have greater rate relief.

I am also pleased by some of the announcements about Northern Ireland. There is about £1 billion of funding here for Northern Ireland. Some of that comes from money being released that previously had conditions attached to it, but some is new money. The £350 million city deal will have a great impact on modernising industry in Northern Ireland, increasing productivity, sending us in the direction of the growth industries for the future, and promoting the tourist industry. The additional £2 million for Belfast city centre, for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and my hon. Friends the Members for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) lobbied, will be important given the short-term difficulties that traders face.

I am disappointed, however, that more progress has not been made on reducing VAT or air passenger duty. The Irish Republic has ruthlessly pursued a tax policy to the detriment of the tourist industry and airports of Northern Ireland. That should be a warning to those
who say that it would be good to stay in the single market, because the single market’s rules on state aid mean that it has not been possible to consider reductions in VAT or the air passenger duty for Northern Ireland. Some say that part of any Brexit deal should be that Northern Ireland stays in the single market, but we would be tied into EU rules, which would impair our ability to fine tune the economy. I found it strange that the Chancellor proposes to increase passenger duty revenue in the United Kingdom by nearly 30% over the next five years by putting up the duty on long-haul flights, because that will simply allow even more leakage as people will fly from the United Kingdom through the Irish Republic to escape air passenger duty. That just does not make sense and will have an impact on regional airports across the United Kingdom.

The DUP is pleased by the proposals for universal credit and that measures are being taken to deal with UC migration. I do not know whether £1 billion will be enough, and we will monitor that closely because, like the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), I believe that universal credit is actually a good policy. It helps those on benefits, because they do not have to apply for a multitude of benefits and because it helps them into work. However, if it becomes a botched policy, it will fail and will have a stigma attached to it because sufficient resources were not put into it in the first place. We need to consider that carefully as the statutory instruments come through the House. The DUP gives a cautious welcome to this Budget. We welcome the extra £320 million for Northern Ireland and the Barnett consequentials, which we look forward to being spent.

8.19 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) in this Budget debate. I thought that the Chancellor started in the right place this afternoon when he laid out the history of the last eight or so years, recalling the truly mammoth task facing the then Chancellor of the Exchequer when this Administration came into office in 2010. The budget deficit stood at almost 10% of GDP, one of the highest in western Europe. Unemployment stood at 8% and had been rising, and there was a recession—economic growth was negative and the economy had been contracting.

The history of the last eight years has been of a slow, painstaking and methodical effort to rectify the problems that the Administration inherited back in 2010. Those painstaking actions have slowly and progressively yielded results, with the deficit falling to about 2% of GDP, growth ticking along and, most importantly of all, unemployment being halved to 4%. When we mention that on social media, some people immediately reply that those are all worthless jobs, which of course is not true because 80% of the jobs that have been created are full time. Those 3 million jobs are valuable and are helping those doing them out of poverty and towards prosperity.

Because of the methodical, careful approach over the past eight years, we have today been able to increase public expenditure significantly in a range of important areas. The NHS, of course, is the most important, with an enormous £20 billion real-terms increase by 2023, but there are other areas, too. The MOD is getting £1 billion, and extra money is being put into universal credit.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim asked what that means fiscally. After this afternoon’s Budget statement, the Resolution Foundation said that the amount of money now being spent by the Government on universal credit exceeds the amount of money that was previously spent on the old benefits. Anyone who is concerned about the total impact of universal credit should take great comfort from the fact that more money will be spent on the new system than was spent on the old system.

Croydon, the borough I represent, is at the top of the list for universal credit roll-out. Some 43% of my constituents who are claiming benefits are now on universal credit—by my estimation that is about 4,000 people in my constituency. Twenty-one constituents have approached me with universal credit problems in the past six months. That is obviously 21 too many, but let us keep it in proportion. That is 21 cases out of about 4,000. Yes, there is more to do to fine tune universal credit—I do not dispute that for a second—but it is moving firmly in the right direction.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) said that he supports broad-based tax increases to pay for better public services. Of course I support making sure that public services are properly funded, but the way to do that is not by increasing taxes across the board but by encouraging economic growth. The proceeds of that economic growth can then fund public services.

Fairness is also important, and I know it is important to Labour Members, too. They will take comfort, as I do, from the fact that income inequality is lower now than it was in 2010, and it is almost at the record low of 1986. The national minimum wage will go up to £8.21 an hour next April, which is a 38% increase on 2010, when it was only £5.93. Taking into account the increase in the personal allowance, the post-tax income of someone working full time on the national minimum wage is up 44% as against 2010. Cumulatively, inflation over that period is about 25%. I am proud that a Conservative Government have done that to help people on the lowest incomes improve their prosperity, even after accounting for inflation.

Labour Members often measure a Government’s success or compassion by the amount of money they spend in total. Of course it is important to make sure that public services are properly funded, but outcomes are what actually matter, not simply the amount of money spent. In education, for example, we now see that 86% of children are at good or outstanding schools, compared with 68% previously—that is the most important statistic. Children are getting a better education. Of course we have to fund schools properly, but it is the quality of education that ultimately matters.

The SNP has one Member remaining in the Chamber. The SNP criticises our plans for leaving the European Union, and of course I hope we get a good free trade deal, but the most important market for Scotland is the rest of the United Kingdom—61% of the exports leaving Scotland’s borders go to the rest of the United Kingdom, 23% go outside the European Union, and 17% go to the EU, excluding the UK. Scotland’s most important market by far is the United Kingdom.
There is a lot more I want to say about various specific measures, but I will have to save it for another time, owing to the restriction on time—[Interruption.] I can see that Opposition Front Benchers are disappointed. I support the measures taken in the Budget, and I encourage the Chancellor to continue with them.

8.25 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Two major issues act as a backdrop to the Chancellor’s Budget. First is the Prime Minister’s pledge that austerity is over, and it is worth remembering what she said: “a decade after the financial crash, people need to know that the austerity it led to is over and that their hard work has paid off.”

That is unequivocal. We expected to see the end of austerity made real today by the Chancellor, if that is indeed the Government’s policy. Secondly, unless they can be stopped by this House, Tory Brexit plans are likely to impose a massive economic shock on the UK, and the harder the Brexit engineered by our Government, the worse that shock will be.

We have already lost 2% to 2.5% of expected GDP growth over the past two years, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, because of the uncertainty created by Brexit and the Government’s incompetence in dealing with it. The Chancellor has dodged dealing with Brexit uncertainties today by completely ignoring them and promising us an emergency Budget in the spring if we crash out of the EU with no deal, as half his Cabinet and the most hard-line Brexit supporting members of his parliamentary party seek to make us do.

As for the idea of ending austerity, what would such a Budget look like? Not like the Budget we have just heard. To be fair to the Chancellor, he said only that austerity is coming to an end. In other words, it will be going on for years to come. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the narrowest possible definition of a Budget that ensures that austerity is over would require the Chancellor to find an extra £19 billion. The Resolution Foundation suggests that more is needed for austerity to be over, and it has said that the package would cost £31 billion and would have to include cancelling the final year of the four-year benefits freeze.

The measures we have heard today come nowhere near doing either of those things, so austerity is not over for our public services. Liverpool City Council has already had to make cuts of £444 million since 2010, and it has to find another £41 million by next April. The council has to spend more than it can raise in council tax simply to pay for adult social care alone, and by 2020 it will have lost 58% of its budget—it is one of the worst-hit local authorities in the country. It is welcome that the Chancellor announced £650 million for social care, but Liverpool City Council alone will lose £70 million over the 10 years from 2010 to 2020, and it hardly makes up for the £7 billion cuts to adult social care or for the £5.8 billion funding gap that local authorities are having to cope with nationally.

What about Merseyside police? It has faced a budget cut of 31% in real terms since 2010, the joint biggest cut faced by any police force in England. It has meant a quarter of all our police officers have gone, 1,119 of them, yet crime is increasing—it has gone up by 29% in the past five years, with a 12% increase in the past year alone. We have 150 organised crime groups active on Merseyside and we have seen a 50% increase in firearms offences, including shootings and killings in my constituency and across our communities in the past two years, as our police are increasingly not being resourced to meet the demands placed upon them.

My Merseyside colleagues and I have had numerous meetings with Ministers over the past two years about tackling increasing gun crime, something we have repeatedly raised in the House, but we have had nothing practical to show for it from the Government, who are intent only on pursuing more cuts. So I looked in the Red Book, where the Chancellor only promised a review of police spending power and a Home Office statement in December. The Red Book shows Home Office capital departmental expenditure limits and resource DEL declining, so I cannot hold out too much hope for extra money for our police. There are increasing pressures on the police, for example, on funding the police pension deficit, with the chief constable of Merseyside saying that another 300 officers will have to be cut if it has to be funded out of existing resources, which I understand is the plan. Our fire and rescue service faces similar problems, as it has had a 50% cut in real terms and has lost a third of all firefighters. Half of our home safety visits have been cut over this period, and the number of fire engines has been cut from 42 to 24—and the cuts have not finished.

For these public services, which matter so much for our communities, it does not feel at all as though austerity is ending, nor has anything the Chancellor has said today given them any real hope that that is indeed the case. Austerity is not over, neither is it coming to an end, and the Brexit shock is around the corner. In effect, the Chancellor said that he will have an emergency Budget if there is a no-deal Brexit—half his colleagues actually want that—which makes this Budget’s forecasts even more fantastical than his Budgets usually seem to be. The Government’s own forecasts suggest that in the north-west a no-deal Brexit would cut GDP by 12% over the next 15 years, which would be a disaster. The Merseyside public services I have been describing, already weakened by years of austerity, will not be able to withstand such a massive shock. For that reason, whatever deal the Government come back with from Brussels—if indeed there is one—should be put to the country in a people’s vote, with the best deal, our current deal, also on the ballot paper as a choice in that event.

8.30 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to follow my colleague. Without a doubt, this Parliament has been dominated by Brexit and its all-pervading undercurrent, but we have also witnessed considerable economic resilience, which is very much thanks to this Government. Pay has been rising faster than inflation for the past five months; average real wages have grown at a 10-year high; and companies are hiring at record levels. Taunton Deane is no exception to that. Nationally, 1,000 jobs are being created every day and unemployment is at a record low, but what is really important is that measures are in place to help people keep more of their hard-earned money. So I want to highlight the help that has been given in this Budget, not least in raising the personal allowance to £12,000 a whole year earlier than was planned.

The country’s finances of course still need careful handling, and the Chancellor is proving that he is a safe pair of hands, particularly as he has demonstrated that
we are no longer borrowing to fund current spending. I am sure Members will not be surprised to learn that I am going to focus mainly on my constituency and the south-west region, and things in the Budget that relate to my area. In this respect, I am really pleased that the Chancellor is focusing on productivity. We have many small and medium-sized businesses in Taunton Deane, where they are the lifeblood of the area. Although they are demonstrating great resilience, ingenuity and quality, as we have recently seen in the Somerset business awards, which I recently attended, productivity levels in the wider south-west region are generally lower than in the rest of the country. With the right level of input, strategy and Government resources, we can build on the unique assets of the south-west; we could double output from this region within 20 years.

I am pleased that in the Budget the Chancellor is focusing on all the things that will increase productivity: investment in skills; investment in infrastructure; investment in digital infrastructure; and, in particular, investment in transport. Today’s announcement in the Budget of new money for roads, all £30 billion of it, is therefore really welcome. I hope that some of it will come the way of the south-west, especially as one of the priorities of the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership is to build the A38/M5 corridor. While on the subject of roads, I have to mention potholes, one of the things most often mentioned in my constituency. The announcement to help deal with them is welcome, especially the fact that Somerset County Council will get £4 million.

On broadband, the Chancellor has emphasised the need to improve our digital infrastructure, and the £200 million devoted to that is welcome. But before we go any further I hope that delays in the final roll-out of the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme, and the fiasco that is Gigaclear, will be cleared up. I have high hopes that some of the new broadband approaches that are to be piloted in rural areas, starting with my constituency, and many of them operate on the high streets. I am running my own high streets awards to try to help to raise the level of attention given to some of our great high street businesses, but we need to do a great deal more than that. The business rate relief for small retailers with a rateable value of £51,000 or less is genuinely welcome. It will really help pubs, newsagents and other such businesses.

Many companies in Taunton Deane are small and medium-sized—indeed, they are the lifeblood of the area—and many of them operate on the high streets. I am running my own high streets awards to try to help to raise the level of attention given to some of our great high street businesses, but we need to do a great deal more than that. The business rate relief for small retailers with a rateable value of £51,000 or less is genuinely welcome. It will really help pubs, newsagents and other such businesses.

On the housing front, Taunton Deane is building new homes at a rate way above the national average, with a great many of them affordable. It is really important to deliver the infrastructure alongside those houses, so I am really pleased with the £500 million in the Budget for housing infrastructure. I sincerely hope that some of that money makes its way to Somerset, because we really need some of it to deliver the right infrastructure for our homes.

I welcome the fact that 20 authorities might be able to transform their children’s services—Somerset County Council will apply for that; I welcome the £650 million for adult social care, of which Somerset County Council will get £6 million; and I am really pleased that there is more funding for children’s mental health, for which the Somerset MPs worked so hard and in which I played a major role.

Let me round up. I was delighted by the flush of success that local loos are getting in the Budget. On an environmental note, I have to mention the new tax on plastic packaging that does not contain 30% recycled plastic. On the tree front, there was the absolutely brilliant news that £60 million is going to go on planting trees. I just met Alan Titchmarsh downstairs at a meeting of the all-party group on gardening and he was absolutely delighted that that money is in the Budget. We need not only a fiscally sustainable economy but a sustainable environment. On that note, it is really welcome that we will help our local cider makers to remain sustainable. I have worked very hard on the issue and am delighted that cider duty has been frozen. Three cheers to the Chancellor! I commend the Budget to the House.
to end; Labour will end austerity and then start to repair the years of damage that this out-of-touch, callous Tory Government have caused.

8.39 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher). I am sorry to hear that she was so disappointed by the Budget. One thing that I did notice is that, since 2010, employment in her constituency has halved—in fact it has done better than that—so perhaps that is something that she could welcome next time she speaks on the economy.

Listening to the Chancellor, I was reminded of how far we have come since 2010. Back then, borrowing was more than £150 billion per annum, the deficit was 10% of GDP, unemployment was over 8% and nine out of 10 households were receiving benefits. We had an unsustainable benefit system, dis incentivising work and trapping people on benefits; an unsustainable public sector; and, overall, unsustainable finances, with the Government failing to collect enough tax to pay for our public services, even in the good times, so I will take no lessons from the Opposition on taxing the wealthy.

By contrast, let us look at where we are now: debt falling as a share of GDP; the deficit down four fifths; steady growth exceeding forecasts; the lowest unemployment in my lifetime; real terms wage growth; and lower tax rates, but higher tax revenues, which, after all, is what matters. We have an economy that can fund investment in infrastructure and investment in public services and do so without beating up businesses or loading debt on to future generations.

Throughout the Chancellor’s speech, I noticed the faces of those on the Opposition Front Bench looking very glum. I fear that there was too much good news. By contrast, I want to mention four areas of the Chancellor’s speech that I particularly welcomed. First, there was support for businesses to which we look for economic growth, for jobs, for higher wages, and, yes, for taxes. I welcomed the Chancellor’s support for entrepreneurs—I should declare an interest because I am married to one. I welcome the support for start-ups, including for entrepreneurial benefits claimants, which reminded me of a lady who came to my last surgery. She was trying to start up a business so that she was no longer reliant on benefits. She specifically asked for more mentoring, so I welcome that in the Budget, along with support for high street shops. I suspect that all of us in this Chamber shop online. I certainly do, but I also cherish the town and village centres in my constituency. We know that high street shops are struggling, so I welcome the business rate relief that they will receive and the Chancellor’s steps to level the playing field between bricks and mortar and the global online giants. As he said, there is further to go, and we would like a global answer on this, but it is a step in the right direction.

Secondly, I welcome the investment in infrastructure. At a very local level, we have potholes, about which I receive many letters and emails each week. There is also nearly £30 billion for major roads. As a Kent MP, this is particularly significant because we are on the corridor between most of the country and the channel, so I will continue to lobby the Chancellor for a share of that money to come to my area—resurfacing the M2, improving the M2, and specifically redeveloping Brenley Corner, a well-known local hotspot and important junction between the A2 and M2. Overall, we need greater resilience in our road transport network, which will support economic growth and, quite simply, make it easier for my constituents to get around.

Thirdly, I want to mention public services and the very welcome investment in the national health service—£20.5 billion was announced earlier this year, £2 billion of which is going towards mental health. The Government have shown great commitment to mental health, already putting more money into mental health, but the Chancellor has recognised that there is still further to go. For the gap to close between access to mental healthcare compared with physical healthcare, the funding for mental health needs to go up faster, so this is another step in the right direction, a step on the path to parity between mental healthcare and physical healthcare.

I want to talk about support for people on the lowest incomes. A couple of months ago I asked the Chancellor, in person, to think about women as he prepared the Budget, and, very practically, incomes for women, because although great progress—[ Interruption. ] I am glad to see a smile on the Opposition Front Bench, perhaps for the first time. Great progress is being made on the gender pay gap, but we know that women still tend to be on lower incomes than men. For instance, the rise in the national living wage to over £8 next year will help more women than men. I recognise that as another step towards bringing women on to higher incomes. That, coupled with the extra transitional support for universal credit and raising the work allowance, is all about ensuring that everybody benefits from a strong economy, particularly the lowest paid.

Finally, I welcome the freeze in beer duty. The largest employer in my constituency is a brewery, so I simply cannot overlook the value to my constituency of a freeze in beer duty and support for the consumption of beer.

All in all, I welcome the fact that the Budget shows that we have sound finances and a strong economy. I welcome the support for businesses and a strong communities. The investment in infrastructure and public services, the support for the lowest paid and the raising of tax thresholds, so that people keep more of what they earn. I welcome this Budget.

8.45 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Eight years in this place have rather inured me to the callousness of the Conservatives. I have watched them celebrate policies that I knew would destroy lives, laughing and jeering at objections that we raised, but I think that the Prime Minister’s announcement that austerity was over went beyond callousness, adding insult to the most cruel of injuries, austerity.

Recently I spent a day with Northumbria police. Austerity has cut its budget by a third—the largest cut in the country—and now the Government are trying to fiddle a further £11 million out of it in pensions payments. That is a third fewer bobbies on the beat, and with rising crime. For the first time, I had to hold our noses to smell the fiddle, a further £11 million out of it in pensions payments.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am pleased to see the Minister on his feet. The Prime Minister’s announcement that austerity was over was met with a смiling face on the Opposition Front Bench. Perhaps for the first time.

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poverty and mental health issues, as well as cyber-crime, historical sex abuse and current day sexual exploitation and trafficking. Under the Tories, the police are protecting us not only from the wrong-doers on the streets but from the wrong-doers in government.

Or shall we look at schools? Austerity will have cut per-pupil spending in Newcastle by £416 by 2020, with parents and teachers forced to buy essential supplies, not little extras. In addition, further education has lost £3.3 billion, so a refugee trying to learn English or a mum needing training to get back to work will now too often be out of luck.

What about transport? Investment delayed by the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government means that my constituents now face daily misery on the Tyne and Wear metro and buses are too expensive for many. Under austerity, transport funding in the north-east is just one fifth of what it is in London.

Then let us consider the services that frame the daily lives of my constituents, from bin collection to adult social care, provided by Newcastle City Council in the face of extraordinary cuts. Fully one half of central Government funding has been slashed from its funding, while demand has risen. The impact has been devastating. Austerity has cut funding for Newcastle parks—so important for health and wellbeing—from £2.6 million to just £87,000. Libraries have had to cut opening times, close altogether or been saved only by community organisations and volunteers. Right now, there is real anger in Fenham in my constituency that the future of its library depends on its sharing premises with a health centre and café.

I wanted to lay out the impact of austerity on my constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, but even if you gave me a week—which I recognise you are not going to do—that would not be enough time to describe what has happened on homelessness, social care, the NHS, food banks, poverty, mental health, jobs and the economy. Austerity is an ideology—an ideology that chose to put the responsibility for the financial crisis caused by casino capitalism and reckless bankers on the shoulders of the poor, the disabled, the young, women, the unemployed and the working people of this country, and to make them poorer for it. British wages have stagnated. Our productivity languishes behind that of other major economies, our infrastructure is creaking and our public servants are demoralised—all because austerity drained the lifeblood from our economy and created a vicious circle. Less investment means lower productivity, lower economic growth, lower wages, less tax revenue and, again, less investment. Austerity helped to create the sense of isolation and abandonment in our towns. Brexiteers blamed immigrants for the impact of austerity on our public services, so austerity helped to bring about the Brexit vote. Is the Prime Minister claiming she will bring an end to that, too?

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister say that austerity is over, but it will live on in the daily experience of my constituents who have been betrayed by it, like Jane, who has had physical health problems since childhood and now suffers from mental health conditions as well. Delays to universal credit left her in debt. At her Atos assessment, she was asked if she had ever tried to kill herself and if she had been successful. The resulting panic attack left her hospitalised. Only a Labour Government will end austerity for Jane and for the country.

8.51 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I very much welcome this Budget, which was positive but realistic in its outlook and frankly honest about the opportunities and certain challenges that face us as a nation in the months and years ahead. We heard about eight years of sustained economic growth; 3.3 million more jobs; with 800,000 more by 2023; higher employment in every region and every nation; wages growing at the fastest pace in nearly a decade; and sustained, real wage growth in each of the next five years. That is a record for this Government to be proud of—reducing the deficit and lowering borrowing, not burdening the debt on the shoulders of our children and grandchildren.

This Budget delivers an additional £950 million for the devolved Administration in Edinburgh. It is right that that money is for the Scottish Government to spend as they see fit, but I do hope that they will match some of the measures we have heard about today. The £20.5 billion settlement for the NHS will ultimately see about £2 billion transferred to Scotland. In the week after a damning Audit Scotland report said that Scotland’s NHS was “not financially sustainable”, that performance was “continuing to decline”, that health boards were struggling to break even and that none had met all key national targets, every single penny of that money needs to be invested in the Scottish NHS. Last year’s real-terms cuts to the Scottish NHS budget cannot be repeated.

This Budget delivered key support for Scotland’s key industries like oil and gas and whisky, as well as our world-leading innovators, backing the technologies of tomorrow with tax breaks for tech companies and investment incentives. The ambition to make Scotland a global hub for decommissioning is welcome, as is the launch of a Scotland-based team for the British Business Bank’s UK network. Increasing the annual investment allowance to £1 million is a massively important measure for Scotland’s SMEs. For the constituents of mine who were hammered by appalling business banking practices, I am delighted by the extension of access to the financial ombudsman, although for many businesses and livelihoods, it will have been too late. I agreed with the comment made much earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, that this could have gone and needed to go further.

I welcome the digital services tax announcement and the recognition that narrow targeting is key so that we do not hit tech start-ups. It is right that we tackle this threat to the sustainability of the tax system. Giving pension funds more freedom to invest in innovative start-ups can be a huge boost to our economy. I have been calling for that since my first day here, and I was pleased to see measures to enable it. I also welcome the commitment to publish a paper this winter on boosting pension saving for the self-employed.

This Budget demonstrates that pro-business, pro-entrepreneurial policies—policies that back job and wealth creators—lead to more investment in our public and private services. While Brexit often takes front and centre in this place, it is not what is at the forefront of people’s minds in East Renfrewshire. I welcome the cost of living
measures announced today, such as the freezing of fuel duty, the £690 pay rise for a full-time worker on the national living wage and the income tax cut for 32 million people, worth £1.32 for each basic rate taxpayer—something that, for now at least, will apply to my constituents up in Scotland.

I, alongside others, lobbied for £2 billion to restore work allowances in universal credit, so I welcome the package of additional protection announced today, particularly the changes to work allowances under which 2.4 million families with children and people with disabilities will receive an additional £630 per year. As the Resolution Foundation said this evening, universal credit is now more generous than the benefits system it replaced. I was also pleased to receive a very nice email in the last couple of hours from the team at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, saying that they are absolutely thrilled with these changes. These changes are not the whole step that we need to take to make universal credit the transformational benefit it can be, but they are a massively welcome step in the right direction, and I thank the Chancellor and his team for listening to the real concerns raised on both sides of the House.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the leader of the SNP, described himself and made him unable to welcome that change.

When Derek Mackay stands to give his Scottish Budget in a few weeks, will he continue to raise taxes? I note that individuals paid between the Scottish and the rest of the UK higher tax rate thresholds now face a marginal tax rate of 53% on that slice of income. Will rest of the UK higher tax rate thresholds now face a note that individuals paid between the Scottish and the rest of the UK.

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This summer, I was approached by a constituent and thanked for my hard work. I was a little taken aback by her gratefulness. As she got back in the car, I saw her children patiently waiting. Then I was told that this was a term-time working single mother who needed the help of the food bank during the school holidays. She is just another victim of austerity—another working mother and another single mother struggling to make ends meet.

What will it be like next year? What can I tell my constituents about how much poorer they will be when we leave the European Union? What will the post-Brexit reality of working poverty be? Let us be honest: it is not the Boris and Farage utopian dream because when we leave, this is going to be absolutely horrendous. When the vote to leave appears to have weakened the economy, it is time for us to have a people’s vote.

This Budget does nothing to reverse the two-child limit, the abolition of the basic family element worth £545 a year or the freeze on benefits until 2020, including most of the elements of universal credit. There are so many problems with universal credit that it is time for the Chancellor properly to fund this lifeline for hard-working families who are struggling and for those who face illness or a change of circumstance. I spoke to members of a Macmillan Cancer care team this week, and they explained how not having a fast-track application process for those who are terminally ill is having a serious impact on people’s last months. How can the Chancellor live with the knowledge that by not putting in place such a simple fix, he is causing untold worry and hardship for people with less than six months to live? When those people do unfortunately die, their usage, on top of coping with their loss, have to deal with the indignity of losing that month’s universal credit payment and have to struggle at a time of huge stress. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions should be ashamed of themselves.

It was disappointing today that the Chancellor failed to recognise the centenary of the first women getting the vote and did not listen to the 1950s women, some of
whom were up in the Galley today. It is disconcerting that the 1950s women are being brushed under the carpet and that this is being hushed up in the hope that they are going to go away. We have seen today that they are not going to go away. Only a few weeks ago, the WASPI women stopped the traffic in Parliament Square, but who was listening? The Government certainly are not listening. While there is a spike in pensioner poverty as well as in child poverty, what sticks in my gut as a woman is that the wives, the partners, the mothers and the grandmothers who gel families and communities together are the hardest hit since this Government steered the country on a downward spiral into working poverty.

I want to conclude by saying that eight years in a job is long enough to bed in. It is rather churlish of the Government to blame their predecessors to hide their own ineptness. I have been in this job for 18 months, and I have smashed my Tory predecessor’s poor record in Gower. Why can this Conservative Government not take responsibility and admit to failing on their promise of delivering an economy that is working for everyone? I can see at first hand in my constituency that it works for the haves and not for the have-nots.

9.2 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Hard-working people and families across this country look to a Government to show leadership and direction. Never has this place shown such irresponsibility and ineptitude. This was a fantasy Budget today. It lets our communities down, it lets the people down and it lets our country down. The Government are scrambling around for any figures they can find to deceive us into thinking that austerity is ending, but thousands of families and cash-strapped councils up and down the country know that austerity is still alive and strong.

In my constituency of Cardiff North, I spoke just last week to a single mother who works eight hours a week for the NHS and has a son with disabilities. She came to me because she has been underpaid, through universal credit, again and again, which has left her penniless and in debt. She has spent hours on the phone in tears, month after month, trying to resolve these errors time after time. She has had to consider leaving work because universal credit leaves her worse off, and she has come to me for help. Will the Chancellor tell her how this Budget is going to help her and others like her? We know that embedded deep in the universal credit system are deliberate and unfair cuts, so austerity is far from over. Will the Chancellor send another constituent to bed cold or hungry who came to me? That is her choice because she cannot afford both bills and food. Austerity is far from over.

While this Government tell us they are ending austerity, they seek to continue their chaotic Brexit negotiations, risking crashing out with no deal and irresponsibly pitching that against the Prime Minister’s miserable deal. We are giving the people a false dilemma, but there is a third way that would avoid Brexit’s hit to our public finances and our economy: a people’s vote. The referendum two years ago was a protest vote against austerity—against the poverty we all see in our constituencies up and down the country. Let me be clear: there will be no Brexit dividend. Whatever the deal, we will be worse off outside the EU. The Government’s own analysis shows that. We know that Brexit is causing uncertainty for businesses, people and communities up and down the country.

For me, also striking is the failure to make decarbonisation and clean growth absolutely central to this Government’s economic plans. The Budget comes less than a month after the world’s climate scientists firmly told us that the global economy has just 12 years to almost halve greenhouse emissions if dangerous, potentially catastrophic, climate change is to be prevented. In this Budget statement, not one mention was made of climate change. If the UK Government want to protect future generations, as they say they do, that must be put front and centre. Instead, energy efficiency funding has been cut, green levies politicised and prevented, and the cheaper forms of green energy—onshore wind and solar—locked out of Government funding. The UK’s recycling infrastructure is struggling badly following under-investment.

On climate action, the UK Government come up short time and again. The token plastic tax goes only a small way to stopping the devastating tide of plastic in our oceans. The Chancellor bottled out of a tax on disposable coffee cups. Unless the whole waste and recycling system is reformed, plastic waste will continue to pollute, yet there were no timescales and no definitive action was outlined. This is clearly a Government who do not care about future generations.

The Government are in a state of paralysis. They have spent more time arguing with themselves and in their party than negotiating with the European Union. Brexit has swollen up the Tories’ capacity to plan for the future or even to acknowledge that people are struggling because of the Tories’ cuts and cock-ups. No one voted for that two years ago. No one voted to be poorer in the referendum two years ago. The truth is that, whatever the deal the Prime Minister comes back with, it will be devastating. It will damage my constituents, and local businesses, communities and people not only in Cardiff North but throughout Wales and up and down the country. This was a fantasy pre-Brexit Budget. It is clear that the Government are unable to cope. There is only one thing left to do, and that is to put the decision back to the people for a final say.

9.8 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): In my contribution to the Budget debate, I will focus on employment. We spend a lot of time in the House discussing unemployment, but I will talk about a group of people who are often forgotten or ignored—the growing number of people who work multiple low-paid jobs to make ends meet.

This Budget fails to address the regressive tax system, a hostile benefits system and a regulatory framework that encourages all risks being borne by workers, leaving the lowest paid in our democracy still at the risk of exploitative employers and the hard-pressed public sector having to outsource work to the lowest bidder. I will read a quote from Anna—not her real name—who works two cleaning jobs, as well as two further jobs in catering in retail:

‘I am exhausted. I get up at 4.30 in the morning. I leave the house at 5.10 for a 6 am start and a 10 am finish, then I come to my second job at 11 am and I’ve got all day here. I finish at
Anna told her experience to two researchers, Dr Andrew Smith from the University of Bradford and Dr Jo McBride from Durham University, who have aptly named their research, “The Forgotten Workers: Low Paid Workers in Multiple Employment”.

Anna’s testimony should trouble us all deeply. That our economy functions in such a way that people are unable to survive without having to work several jobs simultaneously is a sign of just how flawed it is. These workers are significantly more likely to be women, which is unsurprising as 70% of workers contracted for less than 16 hours a week are women. They are likely to be in sectors such as care, cleaning, retail and catering. Unfortunately, the deeply unbalanced nature of our national economy means that this issue is more prevalent in areas such as mine and others across the north.

I turn now to some of the policies that I strongly believe would help to reverse the growth of low-paid insecure work and ensure that everyone has a decent, secure and well-paid job. First, on pay, it is clear that we are living through an extraordinary period of economic unfairness. Real wages are still below their 2008 level and are not due to overtake it until 2025. According to the TUC, only one in five net jobs created between 2008 and 2014 were full time. Remarkably, according to the TUC, only one in every ten workers have seen no improvement in their financial situation, with the majority feeling worse off. We need urgent action to give millions of workers across the country a pay rise. I support USDAW’s “Time For Better Pay” campaign for a minimum wage of £10 an hour for everyone above the age of 18. The current situation, where we have multiple minimum wages for different age groups, is unfair and wrong. I also strongly support the real living wage. The announced rises in the national living wage and the minimum wage do not go anywhere far enough.

Secondly, we must take steps to make employment more secure and regular. The gig economy is often discussed, but even workers in sectors such as cleaning, catering and retail face an increasingly precarious situation at work. The issue goes beyond zero-hour contracts, but then expected to work up to 40 or 60 hours when required. These irregular and unpredictable working hours are emblematic of the flexibility demanded by employers for their own benefit, with none given in return. Remarkably, according to the TUC, only one in 40 net jobs created between 2008 and 2014 were full time. That is not Britain’s job miracle that the Chancellor boasted of today, but workers without guaranteed hours who find it difficult to access mortgages or even to budget for everyday bills. USDAW is calling for 16-hours minimum contracts, with a reduction only if workers explicitly opt out. Most importantly, we need contracts that are based on the hours an individual normally works, providing financial certainty to workers and ending the exploitation of low-hours contracts.

Thirdly, we need Government action to protect and enhance a proper work-life balance. That means extending rights on holiday allowance, maternity and paternity leave, and sick pay. Finally, underpinning that, we need a restoration of full trade union rights at work and a recognition of the importance of trade unions in tipping the balance of power back towards working people and away from exploitative companies.

I am bringing my speech to an end, but I want to quote Thomas, who has six jobs:

“You don’t feel in control of your life—it controls you.”

“Take back control” has become a popular slogan recently, but it is clear that we urgently need to give workers back control over their own lives. What Anna, Thomas and others like them deserve is to be able to work in dignity: to earn a decent living, have time to spend with their families, and know that they are protected in the workplace. That those modest aims are out of the reach of millions of workers is a damaging indictment of the state of the economy under this Conservative Government.

What we needed in this Budget was decisive action to protect and strengthen workers, and to rebalance the economy so that it works for all people and all regions of our country. The world of work has changed dramatically in recent years. We need new rights for this new world. The Chancellor’s Budget has decisively failed to deliver that. The strivers, the carers and the grafters in Bradford, and across the country, deserve better.
[Helen Goodman]

If we followed the Canadian model, the Prime Minister would not be able to finance her £20 billion for the NHS. However, were we to choose the Norway model, we would be able both to increase money for the NHS and to end austerity. I think that the Chancellor should have chosen the Norway model. He could perfectly well have stopped the next reduction in corporation tax from 19% to 17%—there is no need for us to have corporation tax below the international average. He should have reversed the cuts to tax for top earners, and reversed the measures on inheritance tax and on pensions relief for millionaires. And, I ask those on the Treasury Bench: where is the dividend from the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, which we supported the Government in passing to increase the tax take from the money stashed away in the Caribbean by the rich and powerful?

Why did the Prime Minister make this absurd claim that austerity is over? Did she think that by saying it she would make it true? Austerity is not over for my constituents when ward six of Bishop Auckland Hospital is under threat. Austerity is not over when there are seven food banks in Bishop Auckland. Austerity is not over when people come into my office weeping with anxiety because they do not know how they will feed their families. Austerity is not over when Shildon and Sedgefield, which are 11 miles apart, share one police sergeant. And austerity is not over when the local further education college has a 30% cut in its budget, so that we are not even investing properly in our young people.

The Government have protected health spending, but demographic change means our constituents are seeing a reduction in the quality of their services, and the welfare cap means that the increases to universal credit have reversed the measures on inheritance tax and on pensions relief for millionaires. And, I ask those on the Treasury Bench: where is the dividend from the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, which we supported the Government in passing to increase the tax take from the money stashed away in the Caribbean by the rich and powerful?

The Chancellor talked about giving himself some fiscal headroom—or a rainy day fund, or a Brexit disaster fund, as we might want to call it—given the level of uncertainty we are facing. At least he is not claiming any Brexit dividend. He has been careful never to claim that—he knows it cannot be quantified because it does not exist—but he does talk about a deal dividend, and not just a deal dividend but a double deal dividend. What a load of nonsense! He talks about forestalled investment. This is investment that we would have had if we had not plunged into two years of Brexit uncertainty and which we might then get, and we call it a dividend. He says we might not need to call upon the Brexit disaster fund, and therefore that becomes a dividend. What a load of nonsense! We feel it more than most in the north-east, with 60% of our goods going to the EU. This stuff really matters to our region. The North East England chamber of commerce said today that it welcomed a number of announcements in the Budget but that the major omission was support for exporters in the context of Brexit.

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We face a rapidly growing balloon of household debt, a problem that eight years of crippling Tory and Liberal Democrat austerity, stagnant wages, insecure zero-hour jobs, savage benefit cuts and rising living costs have compounded. Some 8.3 million people are classed as over-indebted, while millions more are in a permanently financially precarious position. Household debt was worse last year than at any other time on record, and I encounter it time and again in my advice surgeries. The debt charity StepChange has estimated that more than 3 million people are in significant financial difficulty, falling behind with their payments of crucial household energy bills, council tax, mortgages or rent, and, once they fall behind, finding it incredibly difficult to get back on track.

The Chancellor’s intention to explore a zero-interest loan scheme is long overdue and welcome. I await the full details and hope that the scheme will be implemented as quickly as possible, but what are the Government doing to crack down on the drivers of household debt? What are they doing about the exploitative employment practices that lead to problem debt? People who are on zero-hours contracts, or whose income changes from month to month, are twice as likely to have fallen behind with essential household bills over the past 12 months, but the Government have kicked the can down the road rather than providing any kind of comprehensive response to the Taylor review of modern working practices. Even in today’s speech, it was skated over in the briefest of terms.

It is a national scandal that so many people do not know how much they will earn from week to week, which leaves them unable to budget for basic necessities and unsure whether they can pay their rent. The debt crisis in our country is not about people living beyond their means; it is about people whose incomes have been squeezed so hard, for so long, that they simply cannot make ends meet. As the incisive Treasury Committee report said, real wages are lower now than they were in 2010, and nearly 10 million people are struggling in insecure work. That is a third of the workforce, a staggering figure. In the vast majority of cases, those are people who used to have permanent employment, but are now in the precarious position of not knowing what will be in their pay packet, if anything, at the end of each month.

The Government have stood back and allowed unscrupulous employers to make vast profits on the backs of hard-working people. They have failed to tackle bogus self-employment, failed to ban zero-hours contracts, and failed to address the fact that a record number of working people are living in poverty, with 6 million workers taking home less than the living wage. On average, working people are still £800 worse off than they were a decade ago. That is a shameful state of affairs, and one that pushes households into debt, ill health, and the hands of irresponsible lenders.

Earlier in the debate, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) mentioned that poverty was set to increase if the roll-out of universal credit went ahead. Many other Members have talked about that issue, so I will not dwell on it, but so many working families who are already living from month to month will find themselves up to £2,400 a year worse off. What has been the response of the credit industry? It has been breaking the rules and selling unaffordable loans to vulnerable people for years.

In Parliament last week, I launched a new non-profit service called Debt Hacker to help people who have been mis-sold loans to claim compensation. The research findings that it has uncovered are appalling. A third of the people who have taken out a payday loan have not been able to afford to get to work. Payday borrowers are twice as likely as the average to skip meals because they cannot afford to eat, and seven times as likely to use food banks. Who are the biggest users of payday loans? They are NHS workers, public sector workers and those in the gig economy, and this Government have failed them. But payday lenders are not the only culprits. The flagrant disregarding of Financial Conduct Authority rules on affordability has happened on an industrial scale with doorstep and catalogue lenders, credit cards, car finance and more having a lot to answer for. Why is it taking so long to replicate the interest rate cap on payday lenders across all forms of borrowing to help to prevent people from falling into this spiral of debt in the first place?

To stamp out these practices once and for all, the Government should throw the book at the significant parts of the lending industry that have built their business on the back of ignoring the simple principle that a loan should be affordable. The Government must take tougher action to produce a cultural change in lending, with proper enforcement and penalties on those lenders who disregard FCA rules.

Today’s pledge to extend the “breathing place” scheme is welcome, but that has to include all debts, including those to Government such as tax or benefit overpayments as well as student loans. Part of the reason why the Budget looked a little more healthy tonight is because so much is being pushed on to the shoulders of young people in the shape of student loans.

Finally, Brexit will make all of this worse. The 2.5% contraction of the economy is already making us all feel worse off, as is the depressed sterling and the impact that is having in terms of future uncertainty for employers.

9.31 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Today we have had the unusual spectacle of a Halloween Budget that was certainly more trick than treat when we look at the numbers in the book. The Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box today and boasted of a jobs miracle. How ironic to hear the Chancellor talking about the importance of the stability of a pay packet in the very week that the GMB union is having to drag Uber through the courts to make sure its drivers have access to the basic pay, terms and conditions that other workers have fought and strived for over the best part of a century. How ironic for the Chancellor to boast of a jobs miracle when there is no jobs miracle at King George Hospital which serves my constituency; instead a chemotherapy unit is closed because of a shortage of chemotherapy nurses. There is no jobs miracle in the primary and secondary schools in my constituency that have had to lay off teachers and teaching assistants and support for pupils with special educational needs because of the impact of the Chancellor’s spending decisions. There is
[Wes Streeting]
certainly no jobs miracle in my local police stations: my constituents are acutely aware that the only place where community policing really exists now in my community and every other community up and down the country is in the speeches of Ministers in this place, rather than on the streets of our country.

There is a total air of unreality about this Budget and I think the history books will judge this Parliament unkindly when it looks at how we staggered half-drunk into the chaos of the Brexit negotiations and all that will follow. All I would say to my constituents is whether they voted leave or remain—my constituency is split almost down the middle—they should be very worried about the fact that with just weeks to go until this country is due to leave the EU there is no sign of a deal or an agreement on the terms on which we will leave the EU, and no sign of a future deal that is meant to safeguard jobs, prosperity and the future of our economy. So when Ministers tell them that austerity is over, they should not believe it, not because Ministers are inherently dishonest, but because at this stage it is a promise they simply cannot make.

The numbers do not lie. We should look at the figures in the Budget Red Book today. There is no end to austerity in our schools, which will continue to face real-terms cuts to their budgets. By the way, the £500 million so that has been earmarked for capital investment in the Red Book will barely cover the costs of basic books and equipment in primary schools and secondary schools. It certainly will not rebuild John Bramston Primary School in my constituency or renovate Ilford county high school or Little Heath special school. All the schools in my constituency that would have been rebuilt under the Building Schools for the Future programme under the last Labour Government have no sign of hope or repair from this Government.

The numbers announced today for social care will cover only the next couple of years. I guess that is good news for anyone who is planning to be ill or grow old in the next two years, but the many people who are expecting to live and work for longer are not even being offered jam tomorrow. This is simply a sticking plaster for today.

I am afraid there is also very little good news for the many councillors up and down the country, in Labour and Conservative councils, who are facing really challenging decisions in the run-up to the next round of local authority budget cuts. The money announced for potholes would not even fill every pothole in this city, let alone in every community up and down the country. The investment that has been put back into the pot today by the Chancellor, whether for universal credit or for local authority services, will barely make a dent when compared with the billions of pounds that have been taken out of the pockets of the poorest in our communities and out of the budgets for the community services that people rely on.

The key point that I want to make this evening is about the policing budget. It is an absolute disgrace that, in spite of the fact that violent crime is increasing in towns, cities and rural communities up and down the country, the Budget does not deliver a single penny for policing in my constituency or any other community in our country. It is absolutely scandalous that people know they can roam the streets late at night perpetrating antisocial behaviour, mugging old ladies at the cashpoint in Ilford town centre and burgling people in their homes as we embark on the religious festival season and as Christmas comes down the tracks. They know that they can get away with it because there simply are not the police on the streets to catch them. It is an absolute disgrace. As one now former Conservative councillor said to me before the local elections earlier this year, “I knew that there were difficult decisions to make, and I knew that our Government would have to make cuts, but I never expected a Conservative Government to cut the police.”

The truth is that austerity has such political salience in this country today not simply because child poverty is rising or because more pensioners are living in poverty, but because the vast majority of people have seen and experienced through their own lived experience the cuts to their public services that have been imposed on them by political choice by this Government. If anyone wants to see the futility of this Conservative Government encapsulated in just one Budget measure, they should look at the so-called digital tax. It will bring in a paltry amount of money from the tech giants, which will be given back to them after a few years in corporation tax cuts. This Budget does not deliver for anyone, and it certainly does not end austerity. I will certainly not be supporting it.

9.37 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who has spoken eloquently about many of the things that I also see in my constituency on the other side of London. The Chancellor started his speech by referring to people who get up early every morning and open up factories, shops and building sites, and then implied that he was about to make life better for them. Some in my constituency have done well in recent years, but the vast majority of families, particularly those led by women, do not feel better off. That is hardly surprising when, nationally, real wage growth in the UK has fallen by 3% in the past eight years and when the impact of pay freezes and low pay falls hardest on women. This Government have overseen the biggest rise in poverty since the 1980s, when we last had eight years of Tory Budgets.

I want to focus on what this Government have done to the children in those families, particularly the children who need additional help. The Chancellor hardly mentioned children in his speech. What they need is a budget that works for them, not a Government who are driving an economy in which their parents’ real pay is declining, and who are creating a housing crisis that forces their parents to pay rent almost equivalent to their take-home pay and a work culture in which the only jobs their parents can get have zero-hours contracts so they never know how much is coming in from month to month. No child in this country needs a Government who make a political choice to respond to the worldwide financial crisis of 2008 by implementing, then continuing with, politically driven austerity in which the whole burden falls on the poor and the rich get off scot-free.

Austerity means that our public services continue to struggle with less money and more pressures, and it is not coming to an end. Let me give some examples.
The Local Government Association says that Government cuts have forced councils to cut services, including the very services that are designed to help children and families before their problems start or escalate. There have been cuts to children's centres, to places providing advice, information and support, to youth services and so on, and another £1.3 billion of cuts is still planned for councils next year.

The London Borough of Hounslow has lost 80% of its Government grants in the past eight years, meaning a 40% loss of total real income. Like others across the country, councillors are having to find another £27 million of cuts over the next three years, with £5.5 million to come from education and early intervention. I heard nothing in the Budget to address the growing number of children on child protection plans, which has surged 84% in the past 10 years, and there is not enough to reopen the youth centres that do such a great job of identifying and supporting vulnerable youngsters before they get into real trouble.

On schools, Councillor Tom Bruce, Hounslow's lead member for children and education, told me:

"The Government tell us that there is more money in schools than ever before, but if you ask the heads, the teachers, the pupils, the parents and the governors, that is simply not the reality."

The Chancellor's £400 million titbit for schools will not replace the lost teaching assistants or the welfare and counselling support that headteachers have had to cut. On top of that, Government grant funding for children with identified additional educational need is not enough for the growing number of children who should benefit. Schools have had to cut specialists who provide early interventions, and the NHS has cut school nurses, but those excellent professionals identify and support children at risk and families in crisis.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who rightly said that the burden of austerity has fallen on families with children who need to claim benefits, driving them to destitution. Some of the symptoms of that extreme poverty include teachers having to buy shoes, coats and warm clothes for children whose parents cannot afford to buy them. Universal credit was rolled out in Hounslow two and a half years ago in the first wave to affect families with children. Pressure on the food bank shot up almost immediately, as we predicted, and evictions from private tenancies has led to queues of homeless families, many of whom have had to take temporary accommodation, often at such a distance that they are too far from work, school and their community.

Universal credit is claimed both by families with no adult in work due to disability, who are losing the benefit to cover the extra costs they incur, and by working families—the majority of UC claimants in my constituency are in work. People in west London would starve without their claim for UC being honoured because rents are an average of £1,200 a month while take-home pay can hover at around £1,500—although it is a lot less for a parent on the national minimum wage. Universal Credit is leaving families in poverty for three reasons: it is underfunded; it is chaotic; and it is designed to be a punishment for being poor. Today's increases in the work allowances only replace cuts that were made previously.

The Chancellor's £2 billion for mental health is half of what is needed. The money will fund a new crisis mental health service, but why wait for a crisis? Why not support early intervention?

Children in primary school now were born during and have grown up only knowing rising austerity and rising inequality. Based on today's Budget, they will continue to do so for years to come unless we have a change of Government—a Labour Government.

9.43 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting) made an important point about the lack of police funding, which is affecting not only his constituency, but Bedford, too. The chief constable of Bedfordshire police warned a year ago that he did not have enough officers to keep people safe. And Bedford has seen three murders in the last month. Two people—one a teenager—died from stab wounds, and this weekend saw the shooting of a man in his 20s. Chief Constable Jon Boutcher was right. Despite a rise in serious violent crime, we heard from the Chancellor today that he is not going to give Bedfordshire police the funding that successive chief constables have asked for, that the previous police and crime commissioner Olly Martins asked for and that the current PCC Kathryn Holloway is now asking for.

I attended a Home Office roadshow in Luton last week, which I think was intended to bring community leaders together to discuss the serious problem of rising violent crime. It was difficult to know the purpose of the meeting, because we know what the problems are. Action is what is needed. I had not been invited to the event, and I found out about it by chance only the evening before, but I thought it important for my constituents, who are very worried about the recent spate of murders and obvious antisocial behaviour on our streets, that I should be there.

Only the PCC and the Policing Minister were invited. We were told that the event was non-political, which is why no politicians had been invited. I do not accept that argument. The crisis in policing and the chronic underfunding of Bedfordshire police are about as political as it gets. The results are being seen today on the streets of my constituency—in the towns and suburbs—where violent crime, drug dealing, county lines crime, theft from vehicles and burglary are everyday occurrences.

Channel 4 "Dispatches" reported recently that 57% of burglaries in Bedfordshire are "screened out"—the highest proportion of any police force in the country. If a person is burgled in Bedfordshire, more often than not the police will take little or no action and that person is left to battle it out with their insurance company. With no resources to investigate, the force is relying on algorithms to predict the likelihood of conviction, and the victims of crime are left with no hope of redress or even of the reassurance offered by having a police officer attend the incident.

Our small county force was reported as the second worst in the country for screening out calls—second only to West Yorkshire, and then only by a small margin. We do not need a series of roadshows to tell us what the problem is. If the Home Office insists on continuing with this initiative, it should get out there and make sure that all the relevant people are in the room, not just the ones from the blue side.
The Home Affairs Committee was right last week when it said that police forces across the country are in danger of “becoming irrelevant”, and I can tell the House that my constituents are noticing. It is all because of the Government’s austerity agenda, and we have seen today that austerity has not ended at all. This is what we get when the Government: starve the police of funding; strip local authorities down to the bone; force people into poverty and food bank use with their cruel welfare change agenda; slash public health funding, allowing drug and alcohol addiction to take hold; leave a town devoid of in-patient mental health beds for years; and turn our prison into a Victorian dungeon. This is the result. Criminal gangs are taking hold with no resources to challenge them, and young people are dying on the streets in small towns like Bedford.

It is a real shame that this Government are not looking to fund the police properly. The Chancellor needs to look at his figures again and come up with a better deal. He needs to wake up, because there is a terrible human cost when we make the wrong choices about public spending, and we are seeing the effects of that now.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Michelle Donelan.)
Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 and 3 together.

Ordered,

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

That Luke Pollard be discharged from the Transport Committee and Ruth Cadbury be added.

TREASURY COMMITTEE

That Mr Alister Jack be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Colin Clark be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

PETITIONS

Roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow

9.49 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Today’s Budget for Brexit does nothing to end austerity, an austerity that has always been an ideological choice, hitting the poorest and most vulnerable first and hardest. Nowhere is that truer than in the roll-out of universal credit. This petition was signed by my constituents on a day of special surgeries, where every constituent who attended and all the advice agencies were incredibly worried about the effect of the roll-out.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North,
Declares that the proposed roll-out of universal credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Work and Pensions to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002275]

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Only last week or the week before, the Minister for Employment revealed that he had been up and down the country seeing how wonderful universal credit was, but in answering the same question he conceded that he had not even been to Scotland. So, once again, many of my constituents are outraged that this Government are doing nothing to halt the roll-out of universal credit and, in particular, the social misery it will cause when it is rolled out in the east end in December.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow East constituency,
Declares that the proposed roll-out of universal credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Work and Pensions to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002280]

Roll-out of Universal Credit

9.51 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I have been inundated with correspondence from constituents who are raising their concerns about universal credit. They are extremely worried about the impact it will have, not only on them, but on their communities, their neighbours and people they know.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North West,
Declares that Universal Credit is fundamentally flawed and its roll-out should be halted; further that new claimants must wait at least six weeks before receiving their first payment which, in areas where Universal Credit has already been introduced, has plunged people into rent arrears, household debt and left families to rely on foodbanks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit until its fundamental flaws have been fixed, particularly the six-week payment delay, and help those who are already suffering in poverty and crisis as a result of this policy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002277]
Edinburgh Airport: Flight Paths

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

9.53 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thank you for granting this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, which has taken on a completely different aspect from the one it had when I originally applied. I appreciate that it is on an issue of importance to communities across Scotland and elsewhere who live in the proximity of their local airport or the flight path, but it has a particular resonance for my constituents, who live closest to Edinburgh airport and would argue that they are most affected by the flight path and aircraft noise.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I appreciate that the hon. Lady has just started her speech and I congratulate her on securing this important debate. She will know that, at the beginning of my time in this place, nearly three years ago, I secured a similar debate. Does she appreciate that about 75% of Edinburgh airport’s aircraft go over my constituency? I would therefore argue that my constituents are as affected as hers, if not more affected.

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention; I was going to come on to say that although my constituents who live directly around the airport are affected, I appreciate that communities are affected right across not only Lothian but Fife and as far as Falkirk.

This issue is also vital to the airport itself, which is not only a gateway to Edinburgh and Scotland, but increasingly a gateway to the UK from the United States, Europe, the middle east and, most recently, China. It is one of the biggest employers in my constituency and is a lynchpin of both the local and Scottish economies. It is, though, important to ensure a balance between what is good for jobs and our economy and the welfare of those communities that live side-by-side with the airport or under its flight path. We all know that the operation of airports inevitably impacts on surrounding residents, who have to put up with the high level of noise created by the aircraft.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Lady before the debate and gently reminded her that Belfast City airport consulted widely with the community around the airport, because that was important to do. There is a 9 pm restriction on flights coming into the airport: if a flight comes in after 9 pm, it is fined. Has she considered what Belfast City airport has done as an example of what could happen elsewhere if the airports, communities and Government decide to do something? That could be successful.

Christine Jardine: I was going to mention the timing of flights at Edinburgh airport and other airports during the night, which is currently under discussion.

As anyone who has lived under a flight path will know, the constant whine of jet engines every few minutes can be enough to raise one’s blood pressure, as I know from personal experience. Studies have shown that aircraft noise can be associated with a range of health problems.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate, particularly given how timely it is in the light of the Civil Aviation Authority’s announcement. Although that announcement and the reasons given for it will satisfy some of our constituents’ concerns, it will do nothing to address the problem of ongoing aircraft noise, such as that experienced by my constituents in Blackness, where a pre-existing route that was largely underused on the Grice route has suddenly seen a change in its normal usage. That highlights how inadequate the current procedures are for addressing the issue.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I am sure that noise issues affect all our constituents. We all hear a great many concerns about that. As we become more connected to each other—not just within the House, but the different parts of the UK—the impacts of aviation must be recognised and mitigated in consultation with those affected most.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, by coincidence this debate is now particularly timely. Originally, I was motivated by a call on the Secretary of State to call in the decision, against which I had a great many representations from my constituents. However, just this afternoon, the Civil Aviation Authority announced that it was rejecting the airport’s new flight path proposals, creating a completely different scenario for this debate. For Edinburgh airport, it is a tough blow, but for many of the communities that have endured two or three—as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said—years of consultations and campaigning, and more consultations and concerns, it is a disappointment at a time when it seemed to many of them that a solution might be at hand.

Hannah Bardell: On that specific point, although my constituents may be of a different view about today’s decision, I am sure that they and the hon. Lady will agree that it is vital to have a proper process and a proper legislative framework, as proposed by the Davies report on the third runway at Heathrow. The fact the airports have been allowed to spend money, consult communities and disrupt their lives outside of a proper regulatory framework is the key issue at hand. Her constituents, like mine, have been disadvantaged because a proper framework has not been put in place. Does she agree that we have to make sure that one is put in place, and that it happens soon?

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The need for a framework and for a way to ensure that it is done properly and that we do not have the technical problems and technicalities that have beset this process is important to everyone present in the Chamber. It is important to those who live around not just Edinburgh airport, but Gatwick, Heathrow, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness and every airport in the UK.

For my constituents in Cramond in particular, today’s decision will mean further frustrating delays before they know whether they will benefit from hard work done by themselves and other communities with the airport to
find a workable solution. People everywhere affected by this issue need to know where they stand, which is where due process comes in. What will happen now to the flight path proposals and will something be done to control the way that these proposals are made and pursued in future?

10 pm

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

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

Christine Jardine: I am sure that the last thing that any of us here wants is for this to become an argument about who is most affected, who is least affected, whether it is the noise, night time or day time—

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is really important, as other Members have pointed out, that we have a fair and equitable way of dealing with changes to flight paths. Nobody wants to see Edinburgh airport disadvantaged, as it gives a great boost to the local economy. How do we support an airport such as Edinburgh that obviously needs to grow, but at the same time have an honest and open discussion with an airport authority, or an airport company that has not been absolutely fantastic about doing local consultations? Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to work more closely with the airport to make sure that these consultations in future can be meaningful to the people they affect?

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I recognise that this is a matter of concern not just for my constituency, but for those of a number of others in this Chamber, including the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), who could not be present tonight, and the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). Perhaps our experience with the airport has been different in some ways. Some of the communities have found that they have had more of the airport’s ear than others. That, I think, brings us back to the point of the hon. Member for Livingston that there needs to be a regulated process to ensure that, at the end of the day, everyone is happy with the outcome. Perhaps because of that, this is the third time that this process has been held up, causing different frustrations to each of us affected by it.

The first consultation exercise that I was aware of was in 2016, and that has since been followed up in 2017 and 2018. Since I was elected to this place, the flight path proposals have been a recurring theme in discussions with constituents and the airport itself. Since the proposals were lodged, the airport has been asked to look again at the impact on Cramond and now at the impact on Livingston because of what has been described to me as a “technical problem”—there needed to be another consultation because the impact on Livingston had changed.

I mentioned Cramond because it feels that it is perhaps most affected, subject as it is to 100% of aircraft movement—typically, 79% to 80% of the landings, at what has been measured at 650 feet directly above the homes there, take place over Cramond. In a recent consultation that I held with the local community, more than 700 people contacted me about their concerns about aircraft noise in particular, and especially at night. It is a strength of feeling that the airport, I think, does recognise. I have been speaking to the airport since then, as I am sure others have, about how to pursue a limit on the number of night-time flights and a cap on the traffic in and out of Edinburgh airport.

One key issue of that flight path exercise was to find a way ahead that would allow Edinburgh airport to continue its successful trajectory, which has seen it become Scotland’s busiest airport, while respecting and protecting the quality of life of its neighbours. It has not always been, as others have alluded to, a smooth relationship, but everyone involved would recognise that, through the consultations, the noise advisory board and the work within the communities, it is a relationship that can be both positive and productive for both sides. The majority of the airport’s proposals have been backed up by a robust process and community involvement, but, in these proposals, the airport is trying to look ahead to where it will be in 2024, and I cannot be alone in hoping that it does not take that long to come to a final decision. It is the hope of the airport, and I suspect the communities, that it will now be possible to move forward quickly on this decision—fast-track it, if you will—and prevent us from all having to go back to square one, creating more uncertainty, concern and stress for everyone involved, particularly the communities.

At this stage I ask that the Secretary of State to do whatever he can to protect both the wellbeing of the airport and the health and wellbeing of my constituents and others. We are asking not for the decision to be called in and taken by him, but for him to ensure that we get a final decision from those best placed to take it and the best outcome for all, without unnecessary delays and perhaps with an eye to a regulatory framework that might make it easier to come to these decisions in future, not just for Edinburgh but for other airports.

10.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this important debate on the flight paths at Edinburgh airport. As the airport is in her constituency, I understand that this is a matter of considerable concern to her, both positively, in favour of supporting the airport, and negatively, in favour of supporting the constituents who are affected.

Let me start by talking about the general status of the aviation sector and the airport in general, and then we can focus on the decision reached today and its effect on the hon. Lady’s constituents. I do not need to remind the House that the aviation sector brings enormous benefits to this country. My Department seeks to balance the economic effects of those benefits against the needs of communities affected by any adverse environmental impacts, ensuring that those impacts are properly taken into account.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister expand on the specific proposal for an independent aviation noise authority, as per the Davies report? The proposal in the most recent Government consultation was for that
organisation to be at arm’s length from the Civil Aviation Authority, but my understanding is that that is not the best practice example. The Minister’s point about the balance between communities and business is important, but we cannot have airports being the last arbiters on their own aviation noise. That is not good for communities and not good for business.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady has done a great job of crowbarring a much wider issue into a quite narrowly focused discussion about the flight paths into Edinburgh airport, but I can reassure her that the new agency, which is in the process of being set up, will have plenty of influence over the Government and its chair is being selected as we speak.

Edinburgh is the busiest airport in Scotland—we recognise that—and sixth busiest in the UK. In 2017, it handled over 128,000 aircraft movements and over 13 million passengers, representing 5% and 9% growth respectively on the previous year. At the same time, the airport facilitated the movement of over 20,000 tonnes of freight and 20,000 tonnes of airmail. In terms of connectivity, Edinburgh serves about 150 destinations. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh West will know, this year a number of new routes have been established, including to Washington DC with United Airlines, to Beijing with Hainan Airlines and to Dubai with Emirates. A new service to Philadelphia with American Airlines is scheduled to start next April. That connectivity provides a new service to Philadelphia with American Airlines and to Dubai with Emirates. A new service to Philadelphia with American Airlines is scheduled to start next April. That connectivity provides essential links for families, holidaymakers and businesses.

The airport plays a critical role not only for the local community, through jobs and investment, but for Scotland and the whole UK. Indeed, 5.000 people work at Edinburgh airport, many of whom will be the hon. Lady’s constituents. A study by BiGGAR Economics published in March 2016 found that Edinburgh airport contributes nearly £1 billion to the Scottish economy every year and supports more than 23,000 jobs across the country. The report predicted that by 2020 the airport will be worth between £1.1 billion and £1.6 billion gross value added per year and would be supporting not 23,000, but 40,300 Scottish jobs.

Across the UK, the sector as a whole directly supports over 230,000 jobs, with many more employed indirectly, and contributes around £20 billion annually to the UK economy, with an inbound tourism industry across the UK that is worth a further £19 billion. Scotland, of course, has benefited very much from this increased tourism. In recent years, overseas visitor numbers to Scotland have increased sharply to about 3.2 million people in 2016, spending an estimated £2.8 billion. Many of these visitors will have used Edinburgh airport as their gateway to Scotland. I am sure that that would be a pleasurable experience not merely for them but for all travellers, because the airport has been named both as airport of the year at the national transport awards in London earlier this month and as Scottish airport of the year at the Scottish transport awards in June.

Douglas Chapman: We all know the strengths and relative strengths of Edinburgh airport and what it gives to our local economy, but there is nevertheless a disconnect in the consultation process with regard to communities such as Inverkeithing and North Queensferry and other areas that other Members have mentioned. Surely, we, as communities, should be partners in the future of Edinburgh airport and its success, instead of being the very last consideration that the airport seems to make. What reassurances can the Minister give us that that situation might change?

Jesse Norman: Understandably, I am not going to comment on the process that has been involved because it is well laid out in statute and it is not appropriate for the Government to make comments specifically about the processes themselves. This is a devolved matter, of course, and one would expect the Scottish Government, working with the local communities involved and the local Members of Parliament, to put together a solution that has maximum benefit for the whole city, rather than seeking to beggar one’s neighbour by playing off one community against another. I think that mechanisms exist to address that.

Hannah Bardell rose—

Jesse Norman: Unfortunately, I need to make some progress if I am to conclude this debate, so I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not give way. She has had a shot already and can hopefully have another later on if I can make some more progress.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West rightly congratulated the airport on the achievements that I mentioned. I think that hon. Members will join me in also congratulating the airport on these awards and recognising the importance of the airport to the local and wider community.

It is important to reassure the House that the Government recognise, as I have said, not just the economic benefits but the impact on communities that are overflown by aircraft—precisely the issue raised by the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) in relation to the community in North Queensferry. That is why the Government’s policy, as set out in the aviation policy framework, is “to limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise”.

Edinburgh, like all larger airports across the UK, is required, in accordance with its obligations under the environmental noise directive, to produce a noise action plan. The airport consulted on its latest plan earlier this year in relation to the period 2018-23. In its plan, the airport stresses its continued commitment to manage the impacts of aircraft noise and to engage with local communities. If it discharges the obligations that it has laid on itself, then that will hopefully go some way towards addressing the issues that have been raised.

A good example of the airport seeking to engage with those communities is the launch earlier this year of a new noise and track-keeping system that allows members of the public, via a web browser, to track aircraft and view noise monitor data, as well as to register noise complaints. We have seen at other airports the benefits that communities can derive from the use of these systems. While the UK Government do not set noise restrictions for Scottish airports, noise and airport policy being devolved, we do set the overall framework for airspace. It will be well known that these arrangements, historically, have been based on a set-up that is almost 50 years old. We believe that this architecture is inefficient and inadequate in today’s world and can lead to unnecessary delays for passengers and excessive impacts on the environment and on the communities around airports.
The UK is therefore progressing with a major modernisation of airspace over the coming decade. This is designed to improve the efficiency of our airspace through the use of new technology and procedures. An important by-product of that work should be to enable departing aircraft to climb more quickly out of the airport and arriving traffic to descend more continuously, with less reliance on the use of holding stacks—a more efficient and environmentally friendly means of getting to the airport.

There have also been important advances in aircraft technology, which have provided great improvements in the environmental performance of aircraft frame design and engines, in terms of both noise and carbon emissions. For example, new generation aircraft such as the Airbus A350 and Boeing 737 MAX have a noise footprint that is typically 50% smaller on departure and 30% smaller on arrival than the aircraft they are replacing, which has had an important effect on reducing the noise experienced on the ground.

As the House is aware, the Government have committed to the creation of an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise, which the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) referred to. ICCAN will help to rebuild the trust lost in industry by communities and ensure that the noise impacts of airspace changes are properly considered, by giving communities a greater stake in noise management.

Looking ahead, the Department is also developing a new aviation strategy, the purpose of which is “to achieve a safe, secure and sustainable aviation sector that meets the needs of consumers and of a global, outward-looking Britain.”

The strategy will consider how we can maximise the role that our world-class aviation sector plays in developing global trade links, providing vital connections from this country to the world’s growing economies and to more established trading partners. We expect to deliver a final aviation strategy next year.

In that context, I turn to the events of today, to update the House on this morning’s important developments regarding Edinburgh’s flight path proposal, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh West referred to. As she will know, Edinburgh submitted its airspace change proposal to the independent Civil Aviation Authority in August. In the intervening period, the CAA has been considering whether the proposal complies with its requirements. The CAA has now determined that the proposal is not compliant with its requirements. It is therefore minded to reject it.

It is now up to the airport to determine its next steps. It has made an announcement on this, but further announcements doubtless will follow. I hope that the hon. Lady, her constituents and the House will agree that the CAA’s decision to reject the Edinburgh airport proposal demonstrates that we have an independent and effective airspace regulator—one widely respected around the world—that is prepared to ensure its requirements are met and is capable of making what are, in some cases, undoubtedly difficult decisions when it considers that they are necessary.

If the airport wishes to proceed with an airspace change proposal, it is our understanding that it must comply with the new CAA airspace change process, known as CAP1616. In doing so, it must follow my Department’s air navigation guidance to the CAA, which was updated in October 2017 following a major public consultation on airspace and noise policies. That requires the airport to consider multiple options, to analyse them using the DFT’s WebTAG analysis tool and to consult on the options that it considers practical. If another proposal is put forward by Edinburgh airport, communities near the airport will be able to have a greater say in the final option to be chosen. That is the important point.

The CAP1616 process also brings with it increased transparency via the new airspace change portal, which the CAA launched last week. All relevant details of future airspace change proposals will be publicly available on that portal. The House should welcome that initiative, which increases transparency and accessibility for communities and local people.

My Department has received a request from North Queensferry Community Council to exercise the call-in function that now exists for airspace changes in relation to the pending proposal on which the CAA has opined. We have yet to consider the CAA’s overall assessment of whether the call-in criteria have been met by the Edinburgh airport proposal. My Department will now, as a priority, consider in depth the CAA’s assessment of the Edinburgh proposal. We will then write to the CAA and North Queensferry Community Council to confirm our decision on the call-in. We appreciate fully that the communities around the airport and the airport itself will want to know that decision as soon as possible.

This has been an important and useful debate. I am glad that we have had a chance to discuss these issues, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing this to the Government’s attention.

Question put and agreed to.

10.19 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 30 October 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sexual Violence in Conflict

1. **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to tackle sexual violence in conflict throughout the world.

   The Minister for Africa (**Harriett Baldwin**) (Con): The UK Government continue to lead global efforts to end the horror of sexual violence in conflict. We have developed tools to improve the chances of justice for survivors and in June secured sanctions against seven Burmese military officials. We will host an international conference in 2019 to galvanise the world into further action.

   **Dr Johnson:** Given that the recent UN taskforce report highlighted appalling examples of sexual violence against Rohingya Muslims in Burma, I welcome the announcement that the Secretary of State made on his recent visit to Rakhine of increased support to victims of this terrible crime, but what can be done to increase the resources available to other conflict regions?

   **Harriett Baldwin:** I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the announcement and highlighting the work of that team of experts, who have now been deployed, I think, to 26 countries on a wide range of cases, have helped to train 17,000 people to make sure that evidence is secured and have worked extensively on this important issue in a range of situations around the world.¹

   **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The use of sexual violence was an ugly characteristic of the Sri Lankan civil war under the stewardship of Mahinda Rajapaksa, and now the very same man is back in office, illegitimately, as the Prime Minister of that country. Will the Minister now, and the Foreign Secretary shortly during topical questions, condemn unequivocally the turn of events in Sri Lanka and make sure we never see a return to those dark days of appalling human rights abuses under the Rajapakasas?

   **Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue, which I know has captivated the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Foreign Secretary will be calling the President today, I think, to discuss this very matter.

   **Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): What diplomatic actions are being taken to assist with the return of the 113 Chibok girls who were seized from their school by Boko Haram in 2014, four and a half years ago, and are still missing? Tragically, many of them will have suffered terrible, horrific sexual and physical violence.

   **Harriett Baldwin:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. As many will remember, that campaign is now four years old, yet 113 of the girls have still not been returned. The UK consistently offers its support for the Nigerian Government’s efforts to return these girls to their homes, and we stand ready to do more if requested.

   **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that there are many Rohingya children living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Will she set out in more detail what she is doing to support these boys and girls, who are at extreme risk of sexual violence?

   **Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Gentleman is right to widen the question to the extensive part of the population affected by this terrible crisis. He will know that, from a humanitarian point of view, the UK is contributing £129 million to address it, including through the kind of psychosocial support he refers to.

   **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In recent years, the UN Population Fund has operated fearlessly at the frontline of conflict, helping hundreds of thousands of girls and women who have suffered sexual violence. Does the Minister agree that it is utterly reprehensible that Donald Trump has eliminated US funding for that agency to the tune of $700 million? Is that not one more demonstration that the current US President could not care less about women and their rights?

   **Harriett Baldwin:** I am happy to be answerable at the Dispatch Box for the actions of the UK Government, and I can assure the hon. Lady that the UK continues to support this important work and, in fact, to do more on things such as access to safe family planning around the world.

Illegal Wildlife Trade

2. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking with international partners to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.

   **Harriett Baldwin:** I think the House will be aware that the UK has committed £200 million over five years to support the work of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which is leading important efforts to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.

3. **George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking with international partners to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.

   **Harriett Baldwin:** I think the House will be aware that the UK has committed £200 million over five years to support the work of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which is leading important efforts to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.

16. **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government are taking with international partners to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. [907358]

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific** (Mark Field): Earlier this month, London hosted the largest ever illegal wildlife trade conference, with representation from more than 70 countries and 400 organisations. Ministers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for International Development announced additional support for developing countries to tackle IWT. I pay tribute my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for all the work that they have done and continue to do to advance this agenda.

**Neil Parish**: Many of the countries where there is wildlife crime involving iconic species such as elephant and rhino are war-torn. That is a huge problem that makes it dangerous for the rangers and others who try to protect the wildlife. What more can we do to help war-torn countries? It is essential that we do so.

**Mark Field**: I am sure my hon. Friend is grateful that the London conference highlighted the links he has pointed out between human conflict and IWT. DFID has committed to spend at least 50% of its annual budget in fragile and conflict-afflicted states. Although that does not impact directly on IWT, it should help to reduce it. The IWT challenge fund and the Darwin fund have also supported projects in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan and Sudan. Trophy hunting occurs in a few countries with well-developed tourist industries, but it is unlikely to be a major feature of war-torn countries.

**George Freeman**: I congratulate and thank the Ministers for what they are doing to tackle this appalling trade. Does he agree that one of the most important aspects of tackling it is to create mutual economic interest for local tribespeople and farmers to support wildlife? Does he support the work of the excellent Laikipia Wildlife Forum in Kenya, which was set up by the great British conservationist Dr Anthony King?

**Mark Field**: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. A Chatham House study presented at the London conference examined the link he has pointed out between human conflict and IWT. DFID has committed to spend at least 50% of its annual budget in fragile and conflict-afflicted states. Although this does not impact directly on IWT, it should help to reduce it. The IWT challenge fund and the Darwin fund have supported projects in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan and Sudan. Trophy hunting occurs in a few countries with well-developed tourist industries, but it is unlikely to be a major feature of war-torn countries.

**Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. A Chatham House study presented at the London conference examined the link he has pointed out between human conflict and IWT. DFID has committed to spend at least 50% of its annual budget in fragile and conflict-afflicted states. Although this does not impact directly on IWT, it should help to reduce it. The IWT challenge fund and the Darwin fund have supported projects in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan and Sudan. Trophy hunting occurs in a few countries with well-developed tourist industries, but it is unlikely to be a major feature of war-torn countries.

**John Lamont** (Strangford) (DUP): In the media today, there are indications that China intends to lift its ban on the sale of rhino and tiger remedies. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chinese Government to ensure that the ban is retained, not removed?

**Mark Field**: We are aware of the announcement by the Chinese State Council in the last couple of days concerning the domestic trade in tiger bone and rhino horn. We are concerned, and we will make representations that any changes should not have a negative impact on the tackling of the illegal wildlife trade. Of course, we will raise this issue at the earliest opportunity with our Chinese counterparts.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am glad to hear my right hon. Friend speak about the connection between wildlife crime and other forms of instability. Does he agree that the work that is done by several organisations to preserve not just natural heritage but architectural and archaeological heritage is essential in helping people to have the sense of identity, place and belonging that is so essential to resisting forces such as ISIS and other extremist elements?

**Mark Field**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I spoke earlier about the need globally to recognise that in the case of criminality, we live in an interconnected world. As he rightly points out, a sense of place and being is an important aspect. Many might feel that a concentration on the illegal wildlife trade is, to a certain extent, a Cinderella area, but it is an important aspect of what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is trying to achieve through its soft power initiatives.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): In the media today, there are indications that China intends to lift its ban on the sale of rhino and tiger remedies. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chinese Government to ensure that the ban is retained, not removed?

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Mark Field: I should perhaps thank my hon. Friend again: not only is he very committed to this, but a huge amount of his time over the past six months was spent on ensuring that the IWT conference was such a great success. I do not want to step on the toes of my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa on these matters, but I will of course do all that I can. The other important aspect of what we are trying to achieve with elephant corridors such as the one to which my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa (Sir Desmond Swayne) referred is to recognise that technology has an important part to play in clamping down on the illegal wildlife trade. That is an important aspect of where we see this issue going in the years to come.

**Saudi Arabia: Human Rights**

3. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in Saudi Arabia on the protection of human rights in that country. [907345]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I regularly discuss human rights concerns with my Saudi Arabian counterpart Foreign Minister al-Jubeir, most recently on 27 September and 20 October.

Gill Furniss: Media reports have surfaced this weekend suggesting that UK intelligence services were aware of the Saudi plan to abduct the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and take him back to Riyadh, and of the deployment of the hit squad to Istanbul for that purpose. May I give the Foreign Secretary the opportunity to tell the House today that those reports are categorically untrue?

Mr Hunt: I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I do not comment on intelligence matters, but, if this reassures her, I had absolutely no prior knowledge myself of the terrible Khashoggi murder and was as shocked as I think everyone else was.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It has been reported today that 17 Filipino women are being held in custody in Saudi Arabia for the heinous crime of attending a Halloween party. How much more oppressive does the Saudi regime have to get before it loses its esteemed place as Britain’s greatest friend in the middle east?

Mr Hunt: Saudi Arabia is a human rights country of concern for the Foreign Office. We have regular discussions with the Saudis about our concerns—the guardianship system, freedom of expression, the death penalty and a range of other issues—but it is because we have a relationship with them that we are able to raise these concerns both privately and in public, and the hon. Gentleman should rest assured that that is exactly what we do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Do we have any regret about seeking the election of Saudi Arabia to the Human Rights Council?

Mr Hunt: All sorts of issues with respect to Saudi Arabia’s human rights record are in sharp relief at the moment, but I think I have spoken more clearly than perhaps any other western Foreign Minister in saying that if the Khashoggi stories turn out to be true, that will be inconsistent with our values.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I was going to ask a question about Yemen, but I am afraid I have to follow up on the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), because if the allegations in this weekend’s report are true they are extremely serious. It was reported that in early September our intelligence services became aware of the Saudi plan to abduct Jamal Khashoggi, and on 1 October they knew that a Saudi team had been dispatched to Istanbul for that purpose. I hear what the Foreign Secretary says that he did not know, but did the intelligence services know, and has he asked them?

Mr Hunt: I have to repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), and I am sure the right hon. Lady will understand that it is not possible for a Foreign Secretary, or indeed any Minister, to comment on intelligence matters, for very obvious reasons, but I did not know about this attack. It is very important that the right hon. Lady and the House understand that. We are as shocked as everyone else is about what happened.

Emily Thornberry: I understand what the Foreign Secretary is saying, but he must understand that these allegations are extremely serious, and I am afraid it will not do to hide behind a blanket refusal to discuss intelligence matters. So will he, first, agree to attend an emergency session of the Intelligence and Security Committee to answer these questions behind closed doors, and, secondly, if he is not prepared as a point of principle to say what the intelligence services knew, at least reassure us that something will be done about this and that Ministers will find out what the intelligence services knew at the time?

Mr Hunt: If I am invited before the Intelligence and Security Committee, I will of course consider that invitation, but the right hon. Lady must know that her desire for me to release important intelligence information to the House or anywhere else is totally inappropriate. I do not think for a moment that she would be doing that if she were Foreign Secretary. I respect and understand her concern about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, but I wish that she would show the same concern for what is happening in Venezuela and Russia, and indeed with antisemitism. There seems to be a blind spot when it comes to countries that share Labour’s anti-western world view.

**Syria: Civilians**

4. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the conditions for civilians in Syria. [907346]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Conditions remain dire for civilians in Syria. Half the population is displaced and some 13 million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance. We continue to engage with agencies and Governments to ensure humanitarian access and the use of supplies. Yesterday, I had an opportunity to meet Staffan de Mistura here in London.
Alison McGovern: As the Minister has said, civilians in Syria desperately need calm, and they need a political process to lead them out of this conflict. On Saturday, France, Germany, Turkey and Russia met in Istanbul. How will we bring the UK’s influence to bear to ensure that this is a Syria-led process that puts Syrian civilians at the heart of whatever the political process brings next?

Alistair Burt: I should like to start by thanking Staffan de Matura for all the work he has put in. As the House will know, the United Nations special envoy will be standing down in November. He has devoted the past few years of his work to trying to achieve a settlement and agreement in Syria that will indeed enhance the rights of civilians. At present, he is still working on the details of the constitutional settlement. It will involve a constitutional committee, for which he has put forward various names. There is an impasse on that at the moment, but his work, and the work of the Syrian high negotiating committee, to ensure that civilians have a recognised role in the future of Syria remain a key part of the United Kingdom’s contribution to these discussions.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for that response, but could he take this a little bit further and tell us what conversations he is having with his counterparts in other countries to ensure that civil society and civilians are at the heart of the post-conflict resolution and the peace and reconciliation that are so needed?

Alistair Burt: That is a good question. We as a Government are engaged in regular consultations with states that have an interest in supporting the UN process. Essentially, this is a UN process, supported by the UN Security Council, to ensure a settlement that involves civil society. All the evidence suggests that conflict will reoccur unless women, civil society and others are involved in the resolution of that conflict. The United Kingdom takes this issue forward very carefully.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): But as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said, the UK was not at Istanbul and it will not be part of the EU-US summit organised to take place in France next month. Is it not a source of profound dissatisfaction and, potentially, shame that the UK will not be at the table? What are the Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister going to do about that?

Alistair Burt: Yesterday, the UN small group met in London with representatives of a variety of countries and the UN special envoy in order to be part of the process that is supporting the special envoy in his work. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have been involved, and I was at a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly with other Foreign Ministers to discuss the future of Syria. We are engaged—we cannot be at every meeting, but the United Kingdom is heavily involved in backing the work of the UN and will remain so.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What update can my right hon. Friend offer the House on the resettlement of the White Helmets in the UK following the joint operation to rescue them in the summer?

Alistair Burt: The White Helmets and their families were evacuated from southern Syria under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. That support has been delivered, and we continue to work with other countries to ensure the resettlement of the White Helmets’ supporters who left Syria a short while ago.

Mongolia: Diplomatic Relations

5. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of UK diplomatic relations with Mongolia. [R]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Diplomatic relations with Mongolia are flourishing, not least owing to the efforts of the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Mongolia, and his Mongolian counterpart, former Prime Minister Batbold, who I understand is in the Gallery today. I very much look forward to seeing him again on Thursday.

I visited Ulaanbaatar and the Oyu Tolgoi mine in the Gobi desert in July to promote our growing trade and investment relationship, as well as our bilateral co-operation on the environment, education, foreign policy and defence.

John Grogan: Does the Minister agree that the land of Genghis Khan is now a beacon of freedom and democracy in the region, and that its foreign policy of encouraging rapprochement between the two Koreas and developing diplomatic and economic third neighbours throughout the world beyond Russia and China is a good opportunity for the United Kingdom?

Mark Field: I understand that the hon. Gentleman recently visited Mongolia—his visit was probably more enjoyable than mine, with fewer diplomatic commitments than I have had recently. Yes, that is important. Mongolia has transformed over the past 30 years, and we want to play our part in continuing that transformation, not least because, as he knows, it is a small country by population between two giants in Russia and China, and very much sees its relationships with third countries, of which we are one of a number, as important.

British Nationals in Pakistan

6. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What progress he is taking to ensure effective consular support is available to British nationals in Pakistan. [R]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I cannot even get back to my seat—it is a tough old day on the Asia brief. I appreciate that this is a serious issue for the hon. Lady. We encourage all British nationals visiting or residing in Pakistan to read our travel advice and ensure they have the appropriate insurance. While most visits are trouble free, of course we have a very dedicated consular team ready to provide support to those most in need.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is much in demand, and I am sure he appreciates that fact.

Alison Thewliss: My constituent Ali Soofi has serious concerns that his nephew, a British citizen, is being held against his will in Pakistan—he has been for more than a year now—and that his life is in danger. A court order
issued by the high court in Lahore back on 15 August acknowledged Mr Soofi’s poor health and recommended the assistance of the British high commission in facilitating his return to the UK for medical treatment. To date, he has not been able to return. Consular assistance seems very soft touch, I am afraid to say. Can the Minister intervene in this case to ensure that all means possible are used to ensure that Mr Soofi gets home to Scotland as soon as possible?

Mark Field: Naturally I can. I thank the hon. Lady, who has done sterling work in relation to the case of her constituent Mr Soofi. As she knows, I wrote to her on 24 October with the latest on this case and, in view of its sensitivities, offered to meet her and discuss it privately in more detail. I very much look forward to doing so once our offices have agreed a mutually convenient date.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Many British nationals in Pakistan are involved in trade. A year ago I went to GlaxoSmithKline’s factory in Karachi, which is one of its largest and most profitable in the world. However, given the size of our Department for International Development presence in Pakistan, which is the equal largest in the world, and our consular presence there, what more can the FCO do with the Department for International Trade to boost our commercial activity in Pakistan?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. He will know that the UK shares a long-standing relationship with Pakistan. We have the strongest of cultural and historical ties and, of course, a very large diaspora. On the trade side, I have been working on trying to ensure that that diaspora plays its part in ensuring ever stronger trading connections between our two countries.

Kashmir: Human Rights Abuses


The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I very much recognise that there are human rights concerns in both India-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The FCO encourages both states to uphold their international human rights obligations. Any allegations of human rights violations or abuses are concerning and must of course be thoroughly investigated, promptly and transparently.

Debbie Abrahams: The all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir’s report on human rights abuses, which was published this summer, reflects the UN’s findings. What discussions have the Minister or the Foreign Secretary had with the Governments of Pakistan and India about those human rights abuses? Will the Minister meet me and other members of the all-party group to discuss taking forward our recommendations?

Mark Field: I am always happy to meet members of all-party parliamentary groups, so I would be glad to do so. We very much encourage the parties to keep the channels of dialogue open as a means of resolving differences. The hon. Lady will recognise that the UK’s long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking account of the wishes of the Kashmiri people. The relationship between the two countries is very complex, as the hon. Lady will be aware. We encourage both sides to maintain good relations and make the most of all opportunities for dialogue.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The human rights abuses reported to me by my Urdu-speaking constituents are not a complex matter; they are often simple and horrifying. Does the Minister share my concern that a lack of English language news reporting is keeping these abuses out of the public consciousness in the United Kingdom and around the world, and will he join me in calling on journalists to bring forward English language coverage so that the world can be informed?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. We persistently raise the issue of Kashmir, including human rights, with the Governments of both India and Pakistan, but my hon. Friend makes a good point about ensuring that there is at least mutually trusted media coverage of this matter. I know that the BBC’s coverage in south Asia has become more extensive, and I believe that the BBC World Service is looking to extend matters further. I will make sure that that organisation is made well aware of this point.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I hear what the Minister says about the relationship with the two Governments, but, given that we are talking about two nuclear armed powers and that Delhi is increasingly belligerent with a relatively new Government, is there not something more that the Minister can do to bring the two powers together, given our historical relationship with Delhi and the Government in Pakistan?

Mark Field: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes these matters very seriously, as do other Members throughout the House who represent constituencies with large Pakistani and Indian populations; I speak for my rather silent Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who does a lot of work behind the scenes on this matter but is obviously not able to speak on it in Parliament. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) will be aware that it is not our place to mediate, intervene or interfere in this issue, but I hope he is also aware that I raise the issue of Kashmir at every opportunity when I see my counterparts—the Indian and Pakistani Ministers—as well as the high commissioners to London, because the matter is so close to the hearts of many hon. Members.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week we celebrated the Jammu and Kashmir festival, and the anniversary of the instrument of accession, whereby the whole of Jammu and Kashmir was ceded to India. Sadly, Pakistan refuses to accept this, so what is my right hon. Friend doing to encourage the Pakistani Government to dismantle the terrorist bases in Kashmir that are causing human rights abuses in the whole of Kashmir?

Mark Field: I know that my hon. Friend takes a strong view on this matter. We do all that we can to raise the legitimate concerns brought up by all Members in
this House with the Governments in both New Delhi and Islamabad. However, we believe that the pace of progress is for India and Pakistan to determine.

Gaza: Access to Healthcare

8. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to improve access to healthcare in Gaza.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The Government remain deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. I regularly raise with the Israeli authorities the need to ease restrictions there. Our ambassador to Israel discussed Gaza with the Israeli authorities on 17 October. The UK supports healthcare in Gaza through the International Committee of the Red Cross, and is a strong supporter of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, which provides basic healthcare in Gaza.

Dr Whitford: As well as many breast cancer patients not being allowed out of Gaza for treatment, it is very difficult for doctors to get out to access training, so Medical Aid for Palestinians has recruited specialists to bring the training to them. But on our visit last month, I was formally denied permission to enter Gaza and two other doctors on our team never received theirs. This totally wrecked our teaching programme. Will the Minister make representations to the Israeli authorities to allow these medical projects in Gaza to continue unhindered?

Alistair Burt: First, I have already done so. Secondly, although it is of course a matter for Israeli authorities to make those decisions, the value of the visits of the hon. Lady and her team cannot be overestimated. Thirdly, we are all in her debt for the work that she does to support those suffering conditions in Gaza.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Save a Child’s Heart programme at the cardiology department of the Wolfson Medical Centre in Israel has now seen or treated around 6,000 Palestinian children. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these kind of projects—which bring together Palestinian and Jewish medics, and bring Israelis into contact with Palestinian families—are incredibly powerful and uplifting? Will he look at what more we can do to support such projects?

Alistair Burt: It is an often understated fact of the complex relationship between Israel and its neighbours that there is cross-border work, and that medical treatment takes place in Israel for those from both the west bank and Gaza—some of it is very high level and done in the most important circumstances. Save a Child’s Heart is not directly supported by the United Kingdom, but we certainly support all efforts to make sure there is even more contact between the Palestinians and the Israeli authorities, particularly in healthcare matters.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): The United Nations says that international funding to tackle the humanitarian crisis across the Palestinian territories is at an all-time low, with the shortfall to meet this year’s needs now standing at $380 million. Although we warmly welcome the £7 million increase in September from the UK Government, the Minister of State must know that it is a drop in the ocean. Will he instead do what we have been calling for since January, convene an urgent global funding conference and treat this as the pressing emergency it is?

Alistair Burt: The support we give to UNRWA continues to be considerable, and we have brought forward support that would have come in the next couple of years, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that, compared with the loss from the United States, it is only a small amount. We lobby other states directly on this, and there has been an increase in funding that will see us through a relatively short period of time. After that, it is essential that the issues surrounding UNRWA are dealt with and that funding is found for those who are in need. Ultimately, the issues that UNRWA deals with will only be resolved when we get the final agreement for which we are all searching. In the meantime, we do encourage, and we have seen a response from, other states following the United Kingdom’s generosity.

Salisbury Attack

10. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken in response to the Salisbury attack.

15. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken in response to the Salisbury attack.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Following the 4 March Salisbury attack, the UK co-ordinated action among 28 countries and NATO that led to 153 Russian diplomats being expelled, which we think is the largest mass expulsion in history.

Steve Double: Because of recent events, Russia is not currently sitting in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. There are those who seek to change the rules governing the Council of Europe to make it easier to readmit Russia. Although we all want to see Russia welcomed back, does the Secretary of State agree that it is not the Council of Europe but Russia that needs to change its ways?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Russia should pay its dues to the Parliamentary Assembly, it should pay interest on its arrears and it must follow the rules.

Chris Davies: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing agreement among our European allies for EU sanctions against senior Russians in charge of Russia’s spy networks following the Salisbury attack, but what further action can now be taken in respect of cyber-related attacks, given the growing menace of Russia’s targeting of other countries’ computer networks?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we looked at a map of Europe showing all the places where there have been Russian-inspired cyber-attacks, we would see it is a very busy map indeed. We need to create a new international red line that says these cyber-attacks are unacceptable, which is why it is very positive news that,
on 15 October, the EU agreed to set up a sanctions regime for cyber-attacks, but that is just the first of a number of steps.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We need to keep up the pressure on Russia. There is no point in just referring to what we have already done. When will the Government bring forward their first list of people caught by the new Magnitsky legislation in this country? Would it not be a good idea for us now to include those who are gangsters, rather than just those who have abused human rights?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As he knows, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 only comes into effect after Brexit, because it depends on us taking trade measures, which is what has to happen. Ahead of that, however, we are talking to the EU about whether it should introduce a sanctions regime for human rights abuses, and that is relevant not just to Russia but to many countries.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Can the Foreign Secretary update the House on any discussions he has had with NATO partners and allies in relation both to the Salisbury attack and to the rise in cyber-attacks?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that for the right hon. Gentleman. NATO Foreign Ministers recognise collectively that we are starting to see international norms being breached in an extremely dangerous way. One of those breaches is on chemical weapons; we should never forget that the Salisbury attack was the first use of chemical weapons on British soil, and it is extremely serious from that point of view. The other is on cyber, with the general undermining of confidence in democracy when people think that hostile state actors might be trying to interfere in our elections. We need to stop both those things.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend have a word with his successor as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ask why the NHS—Pharmacy2U, to be precise—is advertising on RT and so is lining the pockets of Putin’s mouthpiece?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to have a word with my excellent successor, but of course this affects us in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well. With the unexplained wealth orders and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, we are starting to tighten the net on people from unfriendly regimes who are financing activities that are against our values.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): In reaching the sanctions agreement he referred to, I am sure the Secretary of State was grateful for the support of the former eastern bloc countries, which he welcomed to Chevening before the summit. Did he take the opportunity to apologise to them for comparing their experience under Soviet domination to membership of the EU?

Mr Hunt: We had a very enjoyable time, including when getting a little lost in the maze. Let me answer the hon. Gentleman’s question directly: I stand by exactly what I said, which was that a club of free countries that was set up, in part, to stand against the Soviet Union and totalitarianism should not, in way that is inconsistent with its values, seek to punish someone who wishes to leave.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It was deeply impressive how many states stood by the UK in the aftermath of the Salisbury attack, not least those that know fine well what the Moscow regime is capable of. So I am going to give the Foreign Secretary the opportunity: what message does he have for those states that have thrived since independence in the EU but were deeply offended by his crass remarks comparing the EU with the former Soviet Union?

Mr Hunt: I think those states agree with what I am saying, which is that a club of free nations should not be seeking to punish someone who wishes to leave. They have been among our strongest supporters in the Brexit process.

Stephen Gethins: I will give the Foreign Secretary a second opportunity, but before I do, let me read out some quotes. The Latvian ambassador said:

“Soviets killed...and ruined the lives of 3 generations, while the EU has brought prosperity, equality, growth, respect.”

The Lithuanian European Commissioner was born in a gulag—I want the Foreign Secretary to reflect on that—and he said:

“I was born in a Soviet gulag and was imprisoned by KGB”.

He has offered the Foreign Secretary a history lesson. Will he take the Lithuanian Commissioner up on that?

Mr Hunt: I will happily send him a copy of my speech so that he can see exactly what I said. What he will see is that I said it was very important that the UK and continental Europe work together to stand against precisely those totalitarian regimes.

**Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan**

11. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the proposed (a) content and (b) timeline for a US-brokered peace plan for Israel and the Palestinians. [907353]


The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I discussed the proposed United States peace plan with the US President’s middle east envoy, Jason Greenblatt, on 28 September in New York. The Foreign Secretary discussed this with the special adviser to the US President, Jared Kushner, on 22 August. The UK remains committed to a negotiated settlement leading to a two-state solution based on 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as a shared capital.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am glad the Minister has made that commitment, but does he agree that the time really has come for a re-energising and reinvigorating of
a two-state solution? Will he personally take a lead in that? Surely what the world expects from both sides is restraint and statesmanship, with Hamas stopping the constant rocket attacks and Israel drawing a halt to the west bank settlement programme?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s questions. The need to keep the middle east peace process at the forefront of the world’s mind is perhaps greater than ever. Just because it has gone on for so long, that is no reason why it should slip away. I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that, everywhere I go and in every conversation I have in the region, they know that the middle east peace process will come up because the United Kingdom must not let it be as it is, because there will be no peace or security for either the state of Israel or its neighbours unless the issue is finally resolved.

Mr Hollobone: After a comprehensive two-year investigation, Human Rights Watch has concluded that “Palestinian authorities routinely arrest people whose peaceful speech displeases them and torture those in their custody.” Will my right hon. Friend condemn that deplorable abuse of power and make appropriate representations to the Palestinian Authority?

Alistair Burt: We read with great concern the report that my hon. Friend quoted. We do not provide any funding to the agencies mentioned in it, although we do support other areas of the security sector. We have raised our concerns about this issue with the Ministry of Interior and continue to encourage the Palestinian Authority to respect human rights and to ensure that complaints of mistreatment or arbitrary detention are properly investigated. We continue to work with the authority to improve the performance of the security sector.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister considered the political implications of the recent tragic events at the Gaza border, where Palestinians are encouraged to believe that they have a right of return within Israel’s internationally recognised 1948 boundaries? That makes a two-state solution impossible.

Alistair Burt: What I can and should say to the House is that it has been clear in recent weeks that Hamas has much greater control over the demonstrations at the border than it had at the start of the summer. Hamas has in effect completely taken over the committee that was responsible for the protests and the march on the right to return, and it is now taking people, including children, to the border. That is a practice that must end. The situation at the Gaza border is very grim. It will take both sides to realise that there can be no future unless Gaza and the west bank are included in the overall settlement for which we work so hard.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Is not it incredible that earlier we had a discussion about the terrible situation in Gaza in which the word “Hamas” was not mentioned once? Is it not the case that the only way in which that terrible situation will be alleviated and improved is through progress being made on a peace process, and that the only way that that is going to happen is when Hamas lays down its weapons, stops using resources that should be used to build houses, hospitals and schools to dig tunnels and to make rockets to fire at civilians in Israel, and stops the incendiary attacks that have caused 1,000 fires on the border?

Alistair Burt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, although very often Members on one side of the House or the other tend to raise issues of greatest concern to themselves and ignore the other side, the United Kingdom Government have been clear about the responsibilities in Gaza. I just mentioned Hamas in my previous answer—but I understand the point—and it is very clear that Hamas has significant responsibility for the events in Gaza. None the less, Israel also has some responsibility for the restrictions and the issues in Gaza, which is why, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, none of this will be settled by one side or the other; it will be settled only by the comprehensive agreement that we are all working so hard to achieve.

Yemen

14. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Yemen. [907356]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The situation in Yemen is tragic and we are deeply concerned by the humanitarian impact. We play a leading role in efforts to find a peaceful solution by supporting the UN special envoy Martin Griffiths, calling a special session of the UN Security Council, and pressing all parties to join peace talks.

Gavin Newlands: In the past three years, the UK has granted military export licences to Saudi Arabia worth a total of £5 billion. Given that the Saudi-led invasion has pushed Yemen to the brink of famine, with thousands of civilians killed in the process, does the Minister feel any guilt that those arms sales have helped to enable the Saudi regime to perpetrate war crimes? Or, as with the American President, does money trump ethics for this Tory Government?

Alistair Burt: I shall say two things. First, on arms sales, which have been discussed comprehensively in this Chamber and elsewhere, every licence is considered on an individual basis. A very comprehensive set of controls are gone through and the United Kingdom sticks to that process. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman referred to an invasion by the coalition. Let me be clear: an insurgent movement usurped a legitimate Government, who were then backed by the UN in order to relieve that Government, and the coalition responded to that call to take action to protect the Government and to protect the civilians in Yemen, who are being comprehensively abused by the Houthi insurgency. The hon. Gentleman should not refer to it as an invasion, as that is just not what it was.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Has our new Foreign Secretary had a chance to review the position of the British Government at the United Nations in respect of Yemen? Will he move from a position of supporting the Saudi coalition where Britain is complicit in creating a famine, to one of constructive neutrality to
secure a ceasefire and meaningful constitutional negotiations, as the UN special representative, Martin Griffiths, is consistently urging and trying to secure?

Alistair Burt: On 15 March, the UK proposed and co-ordinated a United Nations Security Council presidential statement, which called on the parties to agree steps towards a ceasefire. That remains our position. Calling for a nationwide ceasefire will have an effect on the ground only if it is underpinned by a political deal between the conflict parties. Given the lack of agreement between those parties, passing a ceasefire resolution risks undercutting the UN envoy’s efforts to reach a political deal and undermining the credibility of the Council. As soon as the right opportunity arises, we will bring forward a resolution.

Topical Questions

T1. [907368] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Since the last oral questions, I have attended the United Nations General Assembly in New York, addressed a special Security Council session on North Korea, joined a meeting of Foreign Ministers on the tragedy in Yemen and convened a roundtable on Burma.

Tommy Sheppard: Last week, the UN special rapporteur, Michael Lynk, produced his report on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He concludes that the problem is not with the clarity of international law, but with the unwillingness of the international community to uphold it. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with that assessment and, if so, what action will his Government take to ensure the rule of law in the middle east?

Mr Hunt: We are very concerned about a number of the things that have been happening in the occupied territories. We will study that report extremely carefully. Indeed, we are talking closely to the Americans about their middle east peace plan, which we hope will be launched soon.

T4. [907371] Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): What assessment have the Government made of extremely alarming reports of internment camps for Uyghur Muslims in China?

Mr Hunt: We look at those reports with a lot of concern. We had our own diplomats visiting the Xinjiang province in August and they concur that those reports are broadly accurate. I raised it with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, when I went to China and we continue to be extremely concerned about what is happening.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Burmese Reuters journalist Wa Lone has still not met his 11-week-old daughter. She may be seven years old before he finally sees her. He was jailed for seeking to report accurately the Rohingya crisis. Does not the fate of Wa Lone demonstrate that the Government’s position is too weak in expecting the Myanmar Government to investigate themselves? Will the Foreign Secretary adopt the UN recommendations and refer Myanmar’s military leaders to the International Criminal Court?

Mr Hunt: I share the hon. Lady’s concern about what is happening. With respect to Wa Lone and to the other Reuters journalist, Kyaw Soe O, I have raised concerns directly about due process in their case with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and she assured me that she would relook at whether due process had properly occurred, but we are very concerned about that and indeed about the situation in Rakhine, where there has to be accountability. However, we have made some progress. We had the strongest ever condemnation of what happened by the Human Rights Council on 27 September. I convened a meeting at the UN General Assembly about this. The fact-finding mission has now come before the Security Council and there are lots of things that are happening.

T8. [907375] Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The Government can be proud of their world-leading commitment to ensure protection of 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030, but can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the forthcoming international oceans strategy will have that goal at its centre and that it will set out a plan for ensuring that our own blue belt of marine sanctuaries is set to the global gold standard?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his tireless championing of this agenda. I can confirm that the UK will be supporting it. I can also confirm that we are on course with the blue belt programme to deliver over 4 million sq km of maritime protection around the UK’s overseas territories by 2020.

T2. [907369] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am sure that most of us will have viewed the outcome of the Brazilian presidential election with some alarm in terms of the implications for human rights and the rule of law. How are the Government going to approach their future relationship with the Bolsonaro Administration?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is important to remember that President-elect Bolsonaro received a clear mandate from the Brazilian people, and we will of course endeavour to work with his Administration. However, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, our view on racism, homophobia and misogyny is clear—it would never be acceptable. We will remain the strongest of champions on human rights on the international stage and will not shy away from expressing that view where we disagree with other Governments, including our closest allies.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Tunisia. Yesterday the Tunisian capital, Tunis, was the target of a suicide bombing—the first attack in the country since 2015. What support are my right hon. Friend and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office providing to Tunisia in the wake of yesterday’s attack to ensure that its tourist economy, strengthened by UK holidaymakers, does not falter as it is starting to gather speed?
The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We have already expressed our condolences to Tunisia for the attack yesterday. The security situation in Tunisia has been worked on quite intensively by the Tunisian authorities since the attack in Sousse some years ago. We remain in close contact with Tunisia. We constantly update our travel advice to keep people in touch with the situation. We will continue to work with the Tunisian authorities to improve the security situation still further.

T3. [907370] Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): For at least nine months, the Met’s war crimes unit has been assessing material from the Rwandan authorities relating to five men living in the UK likely to have committed genocide offences in Rwanda in 1994. Their extradition to Rwanda was blocked in 2015. How much longer will these men evade justice?

Harriett Baldwin: We are well aware of the reports to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I can assure him that, should there be any issues in terms of action that the UK can take in this regard, it stands ready to do that, should the situation require our intervention.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the Minister for Africa what diplomatic support the Foreign and Commonwealth Office can give to the English-speaking community in Cameroon, which is being quite widely oppressed at the moment?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important situation. I was in the Anglophone region of Cameroon earlier this year. We are following with great concern the reports we are hearing that the situation has not got any better since I visited. We are urging the President, who has recently been re-elected, to follow on his assurance that he would engage in dialogue to address the concerns of the people living in that region.

T5. [907372] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The human rights situation in Tibet is deeply worrying. It is difficult to know how many Tibetans have been imprisoned unjustly in China. The situation will continue to deteriorate without transparency. What steps are this Government taking to facilitate independent observers’ immediate and unhindered access to Tibet in order to accurately address the concerns of the people living in that ground?

Mr Hunt: I completely share the concerns that the hon. Lady has raised. This is one of a number of human rights issues that we raise regularly with the Chinese Foreign Minister, and I will continue to do so.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): When my right hon. Friend speaks to the President of Sri Lanka later on in the week, will he point out that his recent actions are in direct contravention of the 19th amendment to Sri Lanka’s constitution, that the international community continues to recognise Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as the legitimate Prime Minister, that this can only be changed by a vote in Parliament, and that Parliament must be recalled as a matter of urgency in order that such a vote can take place?

Mr Hunt: I will certainly be making those points when I talk to President Sirisena. I know that a number of Members are concerned about the safety of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, and we are watching the situation with a great deal of concern.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The independent international fact-finding mission has recently spoken of the “enduring catastrophe” in Myanmar. Has not the time come to put forward a UN resolution referring this to the ICC and bringing public pressure to bear, to try to prevent it from being vetoed?

Mr Hunt: I completely share the hon. Gentleman’s concern. As I said to the House at the last oral questions, the issue with the ICC referral is that it has to go through the Security Council, where we think it would be vetoed by Russia or China. We are looking at alternative solutions. We are absolutely clear that there has to be accountability, because without accountability, the Rohingyas will not feel safe to go home.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), will the Foreign Secretary confirm that Britain’s position will be to back the rule of law as a guiding principle in Sri Lanka and elsewhere?

Mr Hunt: I am absolutely happy to confirm that—and, indeed, upholding the constitution in Sri Lanka.

T6. [907373] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Saudi-led war in Yemen is causing what could be the world’s worst famine in 100 years, with 14 million people at risk according to the UN. This war is dependent on the UK Government’s assistance and support, and it could not be waged without UK arms and military assistance. What crimes does the Saudi regime need to commit before the Government finally stand up for human rights and bring forward that resolution?

Alistair Burt: The most important thing in Yemen is to bring the conflict to a conclusion. Over the weekend, I spoke to representatives of the UN, the United States, the coalition and the Government of Yemen. Intensive work is going on to make every effort to bring the conflict to a conclusion, and the United Kingdom will play a full part in that.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Following the terrible Salisbury attack, the United Kingdom Government expelled 23 Russian diplomats, and about 20 other countries did the same. Given the evidence that has emerged since then—for example, the attempted hacking of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons—does the Foreign Secretary agree that there is a case for the UK to go further in degrading the Russian state’s ability to commit espionage on our territory, by expelling more Russian diplomats?

Mr Hunt: We are absolutely going to go further. As the Prime Minister said to the House, we will seek to degrade the GRU’s capabilities and will work with our allies to do that.
T. [907374] Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Given the concern expressed across the House about Kashmir, will the Foreign Secretary commit to raise that issue at the Security Council, of which we are a permanent member, the next time he addresses the United Nations?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He may not have heard it, but I said earlier on that we are making it very clear that it is not our place to intervene or interfere in this matter, but clearly it is a concern. The UN report on human rights has rightly been referred to. We very much take note of former high commissioner Zeid’s presentation to the Human Rights Council in June this year and the clear recommendations for the Governments of India and Pakistan. We hope that those will be adhered to.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In the light of recent worrying developments in Sri Lanka, will the Foreign Secretary urge the Government there to make good on their promises to deliver justice for the Tamil people and accountability for war crimes committed against them?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I was in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the month, and like the Foreign Secretary, I am very concerned by the fast-developing political situation there. As I say, not only do we want to stand up for the constitution, but my right hon. Friend is right to say that we need to continue to urge Sri Lanka to implement fully the commitments it has willingly made to the UN Human Rights Council.

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s work as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan. This is a serious situation. We continue to advocate the freeing up of political space and the freeing of political prisoners, as some of the cost-free things that the Government of South Sudan could do to show willing in terms of the peace process declared on 12 September.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): While the nation and the international community rightly focus on the situation in Rakhine state in Burma, I recently met people from Karen and Chin states, and they told me some horrendous continuing stories. I am also hosting a delegation from Kachin and Shan states—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is a busy man—we are all well aware of that—but what is the question?

Paul Scully: Will the Foreign Secretary tell me what we are doing to tackle the situation in the whole of Burma?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest, and he is absolutely right. The fact-finding mission said that there were mass exterminations and mass expulsions in the Kachin and Shan areas as well, and we raised all those issues with Aung San Suu Kyi when I saw her.

Mr Speaker: I know the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) very well. He has many commitments, he is a very busy man and he has a very full diary. There is no need to advertise it to the House; we are all aware of what an indispensable public servant he is.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. For over 70 years, the sons and daughters of Kashmir have been subjected to persecution, oppression and human rights abuses, yet it seems that our position continues to be that this is a matter for India and Pakistan. How many more innocent men, women and children have to die before we at least facilitate peaceful talks between those countries to find a peaceful resolution?

Mark Field: I do understand the passion and the genuine sense of outrage that the hon. Gentleman feels. Ultimately, there can be a solution only if India and Pakistan work together. It cannot be our role to intervene, not least because, as I think the hon. Gentleman will understand, we will be seen by one or other side as intervening on that side rather than on the other. We will do our very best, as I have already mentioned, as far as the UN is concerned—given that a UN report is on the table—to try to bring the parties together. However, on the notion that it is in any way the place of the UK Government to intervene on this matter, I am afraid that we have quite rightly maintained such a position for over 70 years.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Twenty-five years ago, I was part of a British, Han Chinese and Uighur expedition that crossed the Taklamakan desert in western China for the first time. Today, Xinjiang is not a happy region, and there are worrying, wide-scale reports of abuses of the human rights of the Muslim Uighur population. Does the Minister believe that this is something we should be raising at the human rights talks in Geneva?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is a great expert in Chinese matters. I think this issue is of very great, and growing, concern. We will raise it in all appropriate forums, and that may be a very good thought.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State consider all options we have at EU level to prosecute and impose sanctions on those who have committed atrocities against the Rohingya people in Myanmar?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the EU has already introduced targeted sanctions against seven Burmese generals. We are in discussions with the French, as the other EU permanent member of the Security Council, as to what further measures we can take.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What steps have been taken to counter the rise of Russian influence inside Libya?

Alistair Burt: Increased Russian military activity has been noticed in Libya, and we continue to monitor that. We would reiterate that there is a UN arms embargo in relation to Libya. It should be the role of all parties to work constructively with the efforts of UN special
envoy Ghassan Salamé, and Russia should direct its efforts to encouraging parties to work with that process to bring the conflict to a conclusion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late, which is not exactly novel, but I could accommodate more colleagues if each was kind to every other. I am sure Mr Stewart Malcolm McDonald will volunteer just a sentence.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What discussions have the Government had with the Government of Ukraine regarding internally displaced people and food insecurity, particularly in the illegally occupied Donbass region?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman was there recently, I understand. He will be aware that, through the Department for International Development, we do have a programme of humanitarian assistance there, but Russian aggression continues to destabilise the area. In fact, right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary recently spoke to Foreign Minister Klimkin to emphasise our commitment to and support for Ukraine, including through Operation Orbital.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the extraordinary declaration by the Argentinian Foreign Minister that Argentina will seek to enhance its claims to the Falklands if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, will my right hon. Friend confirm that—deal or no deal—there will be no question whatever of undermining the status of the Falkland Islands as a British territory?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm exactly that.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources is meeting now in Hobart. What progress has the UK delegation made in securing a marine protected area for the Weddell sea, which is absolutely vital to stop run-away climate change?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the important talks that are taking place. The UK is very much a co-proponent and keen advocate of the proposal currently under discussion. We strongly support this marine protection work, not just in the Weddell sea.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I have recently returned from Abu Nuwar, a village close to Khan al-Ahmar. There, I asked some of the mothers about their hopes and expectations. They said their hope was to remain in their village; their expectation was that, if Khan al-Ahmar is demolished, they would be next. What hope can the Minister give the mothers of Abu Nuwar?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, both for his visit and for his continuing interest in this issue. As he knows, and as the House knows, we have made significant representations in relation to Khan al-Ahmar and other Bedouin communities in recent times. There has still been no decision to demolish the Khan al-Ahmar village; that is currently paused—a decision by the Israeli authorities that we welcome. We continue to hope that a resolution will be found that does not involve demolition. The United Kingdom will remain closely involved.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): If President Sirisena will not back down on the apparent return of Mahinda Rajapaksa—a man with a terrible human rights record in Sri Lanka—what further steps will the Foreign Secretary take with our European allies to demonstrate the seriousness of Britain’s concern about this matter?

Mark Field: We very much hope that President Sirisena will back down and will adhere to the constitution, which of course means bringing back Parliament at the earliest opportunity. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, when he alludes at least to this, that we are actively co-ordinating our response within the international community. We believe that a concerted international response will have the most effect.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): During the events that followed the Salisbury attack, the incompetence of the Russian operatives was there to be seen, but so too was their malevolence. Our EU friends were hugely helpful in thwarting their ambitions. Can I have an assurance that Her Majesty’s Government will continue in the future, whatever the future holds, to work closely with our European friends in thwarting this kind of threat?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary understand the complete terror and horror of my Tamil constituents at the idea that Mahinda Rajapaksa may be coming back? There can be no justice in Sri Lanka; these people will not find out where their disappeared relatives went nine years ago. What is the Foreign Secretary really going to do to support them?

Mark Field: I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that we do a lot already to support them. As I mentioned, I visited Colombo at the beginning of October and made these points to Foreign Minister Marapana. I also met the Tamil National Alliance leader and a number of human rights and other civil society activists. We will continue to do that work. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady, and I am as alarmed as she is. It is absolutely essential that we get Sri Lanka back to the table to ensure that it adheres to its UN Human Rights Council obligations.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): When will the Government formally recognise Palestine as a state in its own right and a full member of the UN?

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom reserves the right to acknowledge and recognise the state of Palestine when it is in the best interests of the peace process to do so.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Why are the Government not doing more to help UK citizens in Yemen who wish to leave?

Alistair Burt: We have no current presence in Sana’a, so we have no consular staff or anyone available. When people can get to a border, we can offer support, but we cannot physically offer support in Yemen. I know that the hon. Gentleman has a continuing case, and we have done our very best to support him and his constituents in very difficult circumstances. We will continue to do so, but the conflict makes our assistance extremely difficult.
Tobacco

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

12.43 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report on means of requiring tobacco companies to meet the costs of smoking cessation services; to make provision about the advertising and marketing of products that are alternatives to tobacco; to require tobacco companies to publish information about their activities in relation to such products; to create an offence of selling tobacco without a licence; and for connected purposes.

In 1990, almost one third of adults in Great Britain smoked. The most recent figures show that this has almost halved—the prevalence rate is now 15.8%. The Government’s ambition, set out in the tobacco control plan last year, is to reach 12% or less by 2022, with a longer-term aim of achieving a 5% prevalence rate. Despite that relative success, the UK still has 7.6 million smokers, which means that more than 200 people a day still die from smoking-related illnesses that could have been prevented, and that smoking is estimated to cost our economy in excess of £11 billion a year.

In 2017, local authorities cut their budgets for stop smoking services in half. Separately, the number of smokers using NHS stop smoking services has decreased from a peak of 100,000 in 2011 to 40,000 in 2016. The Bill aims to highlight what a package of measures could do to accelerate the decline in smoking prevalence. At the heart of this new approach is the creation of a new fund that would be used primarily to supplement local authorities’ cessation expenditure, while simultaneously encouraging cigarette companies to shift away from combustible products to less harmful alternatives.

I know many are very wary of those products and the fact that many are produced or funded by tobacco companies. We must recognise that the tobacco companies have been extremely dishonest in the past about the harm caused by smoking. Tobacco companies have made a fortune selling cigarettes and they have got the country into this mess. I believe it is only right that they get us out of it. We should and must follow the simple principle of the polluter pays. They have the resources and the customer base to help smoking cessation tools get straight to the people who need them most.

The proposed tobacco transition fund would work in a similar way to the carbonated drinks industry fund, providing incentives for both individual consumers and the tobacco industry to change their behaviour. Over the next decade or so, such a fund could raise up to £1 billion, which would be spent primarily on cessation services; to make provision about the advertising and marketing of products that are alternatives to tobacco; to require tobacco companies to publish information about their activities in relation to such products; to create an offence of selling tobacco without a licence; and for connected purposes.

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The fund would be paid for by the major tobacco companies according to their market share. The fund would be used primarily to supplement local authorities’ cessation expenditure, while simultaneously encouraging cigarette companies to shift away from combustible products to less harmful alternatives.

The fund could also provide extra ring-fenced money to Public Health England to promote switching by funding independent research, with the aim of promoting popular understanding and awareness of non-combustible products. The final element of the fund would be to support trading standards in its ongoing efforts to combat illicit trade in combustible tobacco, with the investment based on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ assessment of local need and impact. The fund would need a robust and independent governance structure to oversee spending by the Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health England and local authorities. It would also require accurate reporting by the manufacturers of their efforts to switch consumers. This could include publication of sales data, and research and development spend.

The Bill would also need to find a way to encourage more smokers to switch. It is apparent that the Public Health England endorsement, which states that e-cigarettes are 95% safer than smoking, has been insufficient in persuading smokers that the alternatives are safer. In a survey last year, 26% of adults thought e-cigarettes were as harmful or more harmful than smoking, up from 7% in 2013.

We also need a new approach to help people receive the required information and support to quit. That must include a new approach to the rules on advertisements. We must recognise that e-cigarettes and other non-combustible products are very different from products that tobacco companies are better known for. It seems ridiculous that it is possible to advertise these products on outdoor billboards, but the same information cannot be provided using the internet, even with restrictions to limit its audience to adults only. Manufacturers of reduced harm products would adhere to a marketing code similar to that which applies to other highly regulated products, such as alcohol. The Advertising Standards Authority would monitor and enforce the code.

We must also look at reducing access to harmful tobacco products that are still being sold. At the moment, there is no requirement in England to have a licence or to register with a local authority to sell tobacco. Scotland has a model that requires registration, which is relatively simple to complete and free for retailers so that it does not hit small businesses. Introducing a register in England would strengthen tobacco control, making it a criminal offence to sell tobacco without being registered. If retailers sell illicit tobacco or sell to minors, they could then be struck off the register altogether.

I truly believe that if the industry is willing to commit to a future based on e-cigarettes and other reduced-harm products, we should take it up on the offer and allow Government and local authorities to partner with it for the financial and technical help needed to help smokers to quit. I am sure we would all agree that we want a smoke-free society as soon as possible. Hon. Members on both sides of the House and even some tobacco companies are now saying this as well, so the Government could not ask for a better opportunity. The challenge now is to make sure that the reality lives up to those ambitions, and I believe that the measures I have set out give us the best opportunity to do this. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.51 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): To be clear, while I rise to oppose the Bill, I do not intend to divide the House. I do not intend to speak for long either, as I know that
many hon. Members want to speak in the Budget debate, but it is important to put the Bill that the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) proposes into some context. I commend his dogged determination to reduce the number of people who smoke, but my fear is that, with this Bill, the points that he raises are either unwelcome or largely not necessary.

Yesterday the Chancellor again increased the tax on tobacco products by a rate above inflation, which means that the tax on some products is now more than 90% of the retail price. Around £12 billion of excise revenue is raised from tobacco products in the UK each year, and that does not include VAT. Each year the Government increase the level further above inflation. It was supposedly Louis XIV’s Finance Minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who famously said that the art of levying taxes is to pluck the goose so as to get the maximum amount of feathers with the minimum amount of hissing. That is the balancing act that the Government have to perform every year with duties, including tobacco duty, except in this case the only hissing that we can hear is the sound of the criminal gangs who smuggle illegal tobacco into this country rubbing their hands with glee. If the Government thought that they could raise any more from the tobacco industry, I think that they would already be doing it.

The right hon. Gentleman proposes that the House should require the Secretary of State to report on how he is making the tobacco industry pay for smoking cessation services. One is tempted to ask how much more than £12 billion the right hon. Gentleman wants or expects, but of course what he is calling for is some kind of levy on tobacco, which he and a few others have repeatedly asked this and previous Governments about in the House. Indeed, such a question was asked only last month by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), so clearly Members are having no difficulty in holding the Government to account on this issue, and I certainly do not think that we need a new Bill to help us.

The hon. Lady received the same answer in September that the Government have given many times before: a levy would be passed on to consumers and so would have the same effect as a duty increase, which is happening anyway, except for the fact that a levy would complicate the tax system, increase the administrative burden on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and create uncertainty for consumers and businesses. It was a bad idea in 2016 when the right hon. Member for Rother Valley presented a petition to the House about it, it was a bad idea last month, and it is still a bad idea today. The right hon. Gentleman keeps banging this drum, but perhaps it is time to change the tune.

On the advertising and promotion of alternatives to smoking, such as e-cigarettes, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have already committed to examining how they can better support smokers with clear information after we leave the EU and once we are no longer held back by the outdated thinking of the EU’s tobacco products directive—and yet another benefit of leaving. The best thing that a smoker can do, of course, is to quit smoking altogether, but it is obvious that those who cannot, or do not want to, deserve to be told the truth about e-cigarettes and other products that could offer them a less harmful alternative. At present, the law prevents manufacturers from giving them that information, but I hope that once we leave the EU, we will be able to change that.

Not all aspects of the tobacco products directive are bad, however; some offer real protections to consumers and deserve to be preserved after we leave the EU. For example, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the directive requires the manufacturers and importers of e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products to share with Government any market research information that they hold on those products when they place them on the public register of legal products. That seems to be a very proper measure to allow the Government to monitor what is happening in this marketplace. As long as that measure remains in place after we leave the EU, it strikes me that we see another part of the right hon. Gentleman’s proposed Bill that is simply not needed.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asks for the introduction of a tobacco licensing scheme, with tough penalties, but again that simply is not needed. The Government are already at work on implementing a Europe-wide system to track and trace tobacco products. That system will require that manufacturers, importers, wholesalers and retailers are all registered on a public database as “economic operators” in order to handle tobacco. That is a de facto licensing scheme anyway, and it does everything that is needed to support trading standards enforcement against unscrupulous criminals who sell smuggled tobacco or sell tobacco to children—with a bit of luck, we will see a few more of them behind bars as a result. I certainly hope that anyone who is caught committing such crimes would be automatically struck off the list and rendered unable to legally handle tobacco.

As I said, the right hon. Gentleman deserves our respect for his tireless and relentless work to reduce smoking. Although it is not my intention to divide the House, I thought that it was important to put on record the context of his proposed Bill and to point out that its measures are either unwelcome or, more often, not necessary.

**Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.**

**Ordered.**

That Sir Kevin Barron, Norman Lamb, Mark Pauwsey, Liz Kendall, Jess Phillips, Crispin Blunt, Mr Charles Walker, Mr Kevan Jones, Adam Afriyie and Tonia Antoniazzi present the Bill.

Sir Kevin Barron accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 280).*

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have just agreed that the Bill is theoretically going to be read a Second time on 23 November. Unfortunately, on that day, 150 private Members’ Bills are going to be considered, 148 of which—now 149—I suspect will not be reached. Under our Standing Orders, the Government have to provide us with 13 days in a Session for private Members’ Bills. They guaranteed that they would provide additional days in this Session, because it is a two-year Session. They are considering having a two-year Session next time as well. Would it not be a good idea if they announced some additional days for private Members’ Bills—today, for instance?

**Philip Davies:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: Order. The Clerk has consulted his scholarly cranium, on the strength of which—and it is a very considerable strength—he was about to proffer me some advice, to which I will listen attentively if I can hear it. In any case, I have a view on what the hon. Gentleman has said, but let us first hear the point of order from the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), if it is on the same matter.

Philip Davies: It is on that very point, Mr Speaker. Am I not right in thinking that the Standing Orders state that there “shall be” 13 sitting days in a Session for private Members’ Bills, not that there will be a minimum of 13 days? Would it therefore not be quite proper for this Session to have just those 13 days, as that is what the Standing Orders clearly set out?

Mr Speaker: Conformity with Standing Orders is a very good starting point, but in reality it is possible for there to be differences of opinion about their interpretation. Recalling the sequence of events earlier in this Parliament, I believe that the Government nodded their recognition of the fact that a two-year Session had an implication for Opposition days and private Members’ Bills, and that therefore there would need to be an explicit commitment to guarantee the requisite number of days. I am not aware that that has yet happened, and that, I think, is at the heart of the hon. Gentleman’s point of order. If he is asking if I think it would be a good idea for there to be an announcement, my answer is: it might very well be, and if there is to be such an announcement, it would probably be a good idea for it to be sooner rather than later, if for no other or better reason than that it would mean he did not have to exercise his knee muscles again by rising to his feet to raise this perfectly legitimate point. I think we will leave it there for now, but I am grateful to both hon. Members for their points of order.

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 29 October).

Question again proposed.

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2019-20.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

1.1 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Four weeks ago, the Prime Minister promised to end austerity. She raised people’s hopes—the hopes of teachers that they would no longer have to rely on begging letters to parents to fund the running of their schools; the hopes of police officers that the safer neighbourhood teams would return to tackle the rise in violent crime; and the hopes of local councillors of all political parties that they would have the resources to support local families in need at a time when a record number of children are being taken into care.

Those hopes were dashed yesterday. At best, those people got what the Chancellor described as “little extras”. No wonder so many teachers, police officers, local councillors and others feel bitterly disappointed at the Prime Minister’s broken promise, because yesterday’s Budget was not the end of austerity. Even with yesterday’s Budget, two thirds of the welfare benefit cuts planned by the Government will still roll out. Outside the NHS, departmental budgets are flat, and the Resolution Foundation this morning revealed that some Departments faced a further 3% cut in their budgets by 2023. Austerity is not ending.

For most people, ending austerity is about not just halting some of the cuts planned by the Government, but lifting the burden that austerity has imposed upon them and their communities over the last hard eight years.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the shadow Chancellor for giving way so early in his speech. May I refer him to page 39 of the Red Book, which shows clearly that, by fiscal year 2023-24, there will be a £30 billion fiscal loosening? He referred to the Resolution Foundation, but it says that under universal credit, more money will be paid out to recipients than under the current system.

John McDonnell: To be absolutely clear, the Chancellor gave the impression yesterday that there would be no departmental cuts, but the Resolution Foundation has said that, although some Departments will be protected, others will have a 3% cut as a result. I call that continuing austerity.

Ending austerity is about more than that; it is about ending and repairing some of the damage that has been inflicted on our society and, yes, has undermined some of the social fabric we rely upon. Yesterday, the Chancellor claimed that this was a “turning point”. It is, but not in the way he suggested. This is not the end of austerity, but it is the beginning of the end of the dominance of
an economic theory and practice that has wreaked havoc on our communities. People no longer believe the myth that austerity was necessary. They are seeing this Government hand out £110 billion in tax cuts to the rich and corporations while their services are being cut and their children are forced into poverty.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Liverpool’s local authority will have had 64% of its budget cut by 2020. Would not a reversal in austerity mean its budget being reinstated?

John McDonnell: We are currently seeing local councils—the first wave has been Conservative—virtually going into administration. That must say something about the impact of a 50% cut in local government funding over the last eight years.

People no longer accept the trickle-down economics that has gripped the Tory party for four decades.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: I will in due course. The Parliamentary Private Secretary has done his job and handed out the briefings and questions to everyone. I respect the hon. Gentleman for his diligence and I will allow some interventions but, to be frank, people out there are fed up with parliamentary banter and want a debate that reflects the real world.

People no longer accept the trickle-down economics that has gripped the Tory party for four decades—the idea that somehow if we cut taxes for the rich and the corporations, this wealth will trickle down to everybody. They no longer accept “public sector bad, private sector good”. They no longer accept privatisation and deregulation; in fact, those are anathema to most people now. What was surprising yesterday was how lacking in self-awareness the Chancellor and his colleagues were and how out of touch they were with the reality of our people’s day-to-day lives. His speech reflected how ideologically crushed the Tories are. They are so bereft of ideas that the Chancellor yesterday, in a major parliamentary speech, was reduced to toilet gags. They are so bereft of ideas that they made a pathetic attempt of ideas that the Chancellor yesterday, in a major parliamentary speech, was reduced to toilet gags. They are so bereft of ideas that they made a pathetic attempt of what the public services that support our constituents have been going through.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Not at the moment, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

What shocked me yesterday was that the Chancellor delivered a Budget that so clearly failed to address the desperate needs of our society after eight years of austerity. Let us look at just some elements of the human cost of austerity and what the Chancellor brought forward in the Budget.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As part of the number crunching that the right hon. Gentleman has undoubtedly been doing, has he worked out how much more would have been available for the police, prisons, schools and local government if the UK had not voted to leave the European Union two and a half years ago? Does he not believe that that reinforces the case for a people’s vote now to restore the level of growth that we saw two and a half years ago?

John McDonnell: I respect the right hon. Gentleman’s views on Brexit because I campaigned for remain as well, but it behoves any Liberal Democrat to come to this House with a bit of humility after serving with a Tory Administration that savaged our public services.

Let me look at some of the elements of human suffering. Health workers are having to cope with the biggest financial squeeze in the NHS’s history.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must reinstate nursing bursaries if we are to see the number of nurses we need in our NHS?

John McDonnell: That is an essential element of the reconstruction that Labour will have to do when we come to power.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that a rise in health spending of 3.3% was needed just to maintain the current stretched service, and that at least 4% was needed to improve it. Instead, according to the Nuffield Trust, what we got amounts to just a 2.7% increase in overall health spending in real terms next year.

Police officers have seen 21,000 of their colleagues’ jobs cut since 2010. As a result, violent crime is on the rise. The independent police watchdog is warning that “the lives of vulnerable people could be at risk.”

What did the police get yesterday? Some £160 million for counter-terrorism—far less than is needed—and not a penny more for neighbourhood policing. And that despite the head of counter-terrorism warning that counter-terrorism work relies on regular policing being properly funded.

Teachers’ pay has fallen by 4% since 2011 and the schools budget has been cut by £3 billion in real terms. Some 36,000 teachers have left the profession in a year—the highest since records began.
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the cuts to education that have left 22 out of 26 Wallasey schools facing cuts and that have seen £3 million cut from their budgets, while teachers are earning £4,000 a year less and having to do more, are an absolute disgrace, and that that demonstrates that this Government give no priority whatsoever to the future of our children?

John McDonnell: My hon. Friend has got it exactly. It takes something, does it not, to have headteachers marching on Downing Street? That has never been seen before. Just what did yesterday’s Budget do to tempt teachers back? What the Chancellor offered was “little extras”. It was an insult, especially when 60% of teachers are not getting a pay rise this year.

There are now 4 million children living in poverty, 500 children’s centres have closed, 500 children’s playgrounds have closed and 128,000 children are living in temporary accommodation. When children’s social care faces a funding gap of £3 billion by 2025, what did the Chancellor offer? Just £84 million for just 20 councils. That will not even scratch the surface of the problem.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Does the Minister not agree that the way to fund education is to fund early intervention to support families. Let the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning suicide. I know what coming into care means for a child: because there has been a 40% cut in funding to councils for early intervention to support families. Let the right hon. Gentleman justify that.

Because there has been a 40% cut in funding to councils for early intervention to support families. Let the right hon. Gentleman justify that.

On young people, the YMCA reports that spending on youth services has fallen by 62% since 2010. The average graduate comes out of university with a £50,000 debt. The IFS describes home ownership among young people as having collapsed completely. Tragically, with the mounting pressure, a decades-long decline in suicide among men has been reversed since 2010.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning suicide. I wonder whether there is anything in this Budget that he can welcome, even though I appreciate that we may differ. Does he not welcome the announcement on mental health or the announcement of a £21 million centre of excellence for public sector leaders?

John McDonnell: Of course we welcome more money for mental health, but what was required was £4 billion, not £2 billion; and that £2 billion was contained within the £20 billion that had already been announced, so it is not additional money. There are some things that we can work on on a cross-party basis in this House, but we have to be honest about the needs and the requirements, and we have to be straightforward in saying how they can be funded.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being a little unfair; some people have done very well from austerity. A thousand of the richest people in the United Kingdom have seen their personal wealth increase by £274 billion over the past five years.

John McDonnell: The facts speak for themselves.

To make a real difference to the lives of young people, the Chancellor needed to address the housing crisis, deal with the toppling mountain of student loans, and restore work allowances for single people and couples without children. Instead we got piecemeal, unambitious housing announcements and re-announcements, nothing on student finances, and nothing on universal credit recipients who are single and without children.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Chancellor’s meagre contributions to universal credit will do nothing to reverse the social security cuts for disabled people. Does my right hon. Friend agree that for the millions of disabled people, austerity is far from over?

John McDonnell: I will come on to the plight of disabled people, who seem to have been a particular target for this Government, given how they have withdrawn funding and services.

On older people, there were more than 31,000 excess winter deaths among the over-65s in 2017, and well over 150,000 elderly people are in arrears in their social care payments. The Local Government Association, which works on a cross-party basis, said that £1.5 billion was needed by 2020 just to fill the funding gap in adult social care. The £650 million that was announced yesterday is less than half of that.

What comes out of the analysis is this. The burden of austerity has fallen disproportionately on who? On the shoulders of women. Yesterday, that did not just continue; it got worse. The share of the Government’s tax and benefit changes impacting on women increased from 86% to 87%—another year with an increase. The 1950s women, who have been treated so unjustly, have been overlooked once again.

The victims of possibly the harshest cruelty inflicted by this Government are disabled people. A UN inquiry into the rights of persons with disabilities found this Government guilty of “grave and systematic violations” of their human rights. Have any UK Government been charged with that by a UN body? Never. To be frank, we know—

Chris Philp rose—

John McDonnell: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once.

Many have taken their own lives as a result of the welfare reforms imposed upon them since 2010, and the Government—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman. The hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) has made his point with force and alacrity, but he should not witter from a sedentary position, engaged in an animated conversation with a Member on the opposite Benches. The same goes for Members on both sides of the House. The shadow Chancellor has addressed the House, as in my experience he invariably does, with considerable courtesy. Whatever people think of what is being said, they should extend courtesy to the Front-Bench speakers, as they should to Back-Bench speakers.

John McDonnell: I understand the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp); he gets excited at times, but as someone who has been excited myself at times, I completely understand.
The Government have been repeatedly forced by the courts to change how they are treating disabled people. They do not seem to have learned their lesson yet, so yesterday we saw no restoration of disability premiums, no end to the cruel social security freeze, and no end to dehumanising and unreliable work capability assessments.

The Government are also putting the livelihoods of future generations at risk. A few weeks ago the world’s leading authority on climate change said that avoiding dangerous climate change would require “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented” action. What did we get yesterday? We got no mention of climate change, no reversal of cuts to renewable energy, and no significant environmental policy.

I am curious: the other day the Government voted through a £650 million scheme to improve energy efficiency and home insulation; why did the Labour party vote against it?

Because it was not on a scale that would have had sufficient impact. I welcome interventions, but I think we should have a rule that when Members intervene they should describe their background, in this case as advisor to George Osborne, who cut back on the solar energy industry, who undermined wind power in this country, and who set us back so that we will never meet our climate change targets.

The impact—[Interruption.] Calm down, calm down—George Osborne used to say that to me, and I said “I’ll calm down when you resign,” and he did. The impact on the self-employed and small businesses has been equally stark. Some 51,000 high street stores closed last year. Wages for the self-employed have collapsed to around the same level as 20 years ago.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was a disgrace that yesterday we heard that the Government are going to save the high street by turning our shops into residential properties and risking the very fundamentals of how the high street operates?

My hon. Friend is right. Yesterday we needed serious action to address the bias against high streets, which has led to so many empty shops. Instead we got legislation that will help turn shops into flats.

We then had a huge media presentation about an online tax being introduced: it was said that £400 million will be found from this online tax in a few years’ time. At the weekend the Tax Justice Network said the top five tech companies have avoided £5 billion-worth of tax.

My second concern about the austerity debate is that if we understand and appreciate what people have been forced to go through with austerity, only callous complacency could drive us to inflict those policies on people. Yesterday the Chancellor’s speech, with references to “Labour’s recession,” demonstrated that he is trapped in a time warp of a political propaganda exercise by the Tories of a decade ago. [Interruption.] I thought they would like that one. Let us be clear: the financial crash was the result of greed and speculation, and a lack of regulation that goes right back to the 1980s. Austerity was always a bad idea.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like my right hon. Friend, I heard the Chancellor try to blame the last Labour Government for the recession, but in actual fact the previous Chancellor said a couple of months ago that it was not the Labour Government’s fault; it was the whole system’s fault, starting with Lehman Brothers in America. We should get the facts right.

I always said George Osborne would get it right one day.

The consensus among economists, and the evidence of recent history, is absolutely clear. The worst possible response to a recession is for a Government to cut their own spending. In a recession, the Government should be there to support businesses and households. Instead, at the moment when Government support was most needed to help people back on their feet, Conservative Chancellors chose to impose the most severe spending cuts in generations. They did not have to, and they should not have done.

The Tories were warned that austerity would lead to slower growth and lower wages, and it has. The economic experts the Tories chose to ignore were proved right. Growth since the financial crisis, under Conservative Chancellors, has been the slowest after any recession in modern times. Real weekly average earnings are still lower today than they were in 2010. The Resolution Foundation reports this morning that real wages will not have fully recovered until 2024.

Ten years after the crash, we should be clear about the causes of the financial crisis. The Chancellor seemed confused on that point yesterday. It was not the deficit that caused the crisis; it was the crisis that caused the deficit. It was a crisis—[Interruption.] They don’t like to hear the truth. It was a crisis that resulted from the casino economy that the Tories helped construct right from the 1980s and supported every step of the way.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman asked us to give our personal history: I was a proud public sector employee for 17 years and I take issue with the way that Labour wrecked the economy and spent money we did not have. Would he like to tell us how he proposes to pay for his current funding system?

Here is an answer: it is called a fair taxation system.

It was the ideology of neoliberalism that said markets were always right, that regulation was simply a barrier to growth, and that, ultimately, greed was good. The financial system this ideology helped design collapsed 10 years ago, and it was Conservative Chancellors who took the political decision to force working people, not the bankers, to pay the price for it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker, you will admit that I have been generous in the number of times I have given way, and I suggest that, as you have a large number of Members wishing to speak, particularly on the Labour Benches, I should press on.
The result has been a period of stagnation unprecedented in modern British history: a period of falling wages, crumbling public services, and insecurity in an economy visibly failing across great swathes of the country. And because the cuts are still, even now, grinding on, the stagnation will continue, as the official forecasts say: investment forecasts have been revised downwards across the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecast period, real wages will barely recover, and growth will remain far below its long-run trend.

The Chancellor cannot use Brexit as an excuse for those dismal figures. The OBR presented its forecasts on the basis of what it called a “relatively smooth exit” from the EU next year, but the Tories are bungling the Brexit negotiations—it is so bad that there is now an impact on the economy. Investment is being delayed and has even been cancelled. Britain already has the lowest rate of business investment in the G7, and even that has fallen this year. It is the uncertainty the Tories have introduced into the whole process that is so terrifying businesspeople. They just want to know where they stand, but the uncertainty was made even worse yesterday. The Chancellor has taken to threatening to revoke his own Budget in the event of a no-deal Brexit, yet on the morning of the Budget, his Prime Minister was contradicting him. How can any company looking to invest in Britain not wonder where we are heading?

For well over two years, the Government have spent most of the time negotiating with themselves than with our European partners. With the date for leaving the EU just five months away, time is running out to present a deal that would respect the result of the referendum and win the support of the House. Instead, as the Tories continue to indulge in their squabbling, the economy and the whole country are being confronted with the grim prospect of a no-deal car crash. I have asked the Chancellor before to rule out a no-deal Brexit. A responsible Chancellor simply would not support such a thing, and would not, as he has done before, idly threaten to mutate this country into some form of tax haven off the coast of Europe. Let us put it on record that austerity is not ending. In the weeks and months ahead, people will recognise that the Prime Minister’s promise has been broken. There are rumours that this was possibly a pre-election Budget with pre-election tax giveaways. If the Conservatives are contemplating a general election, let me say on behalf of the Labour party: bring it on.

1.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Yesterday’s Budget proved the time-honoured truth that careful stewardship of the economy, taking difficult decisions, creating the environment for enterprise and generating growth will lead to better days, not just for those with the dignity of employment, now in record numbers, who did not have it in the past, but for the provision of the public services on which we all depend. This Budget reported record jobs, unemployment lower than in a generation, more full-time jobs, the lowest proportion of low-paid jobs for two decades and rising real pay, with the fastest rises in real pay among the lowest paid in our society, thanks to our national living wage.

We have just seen the big difference between the two Front Benches. While we are delivering more jobs, more opportunity and more prosperity, those on the Opposition Front Bench promise more borrowing, more taxes and more debt. We have just heard it again from the shadow Chancellor: no ideas for the future; just talking Britain down. There is a big difference in this Parliament between a party that believes in the future and an Opposition that would only take us back. Wherever it has been tried in the world, the programme that the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) proposes has led to bankruptcy and misery for millions, and we cannot fund public services on that. Without a strong economy, we cannot fund an NHS that everyone can turn to in their hour of need, whether that involves a life-threatening condition or falling over some fly-tipping. We are able to put record funding into our NHS only because there are millions more people in work who are earning more and paying their taxes.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): On that point, may I thank the Secretary of State for his work on securing the public capital for the Midland Metropolitan Hospital in Sandwell, which had some difficulties following the collapse of Carillion? His work with the chief executive and the board of the trust has secured the future of that hospital, which is now on track to be built. It will be a vital resource for my local area of Rowley Regis.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has worked so hard to get that hospital back on track. It is now being built because we have put in the capital—it is in the NHS budget. We had to rescue it from the failed private finance initiative that was invented by the Labour party. It is only because we have a strong economy that we can give the NHS the longest and largest cash injection ever in its history—

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) rose—

Matt Hancock: If the right hon. Gentleman will welcome that injection, I will give way to him.

Sir Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman is talking about the rise in health spending. He is Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, so can he tell us by how much social care expenditure is going to rise over the next five years?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am going to come on to social care. Yesterday, we put a further £650 million into social care, and we are coming forward with reforms to social care to put it on a sustainable footing for the long term.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to ask the Secretary of State about acquired brain injury. We save so many lives now, but if we put in significant investment up front to ensure that everyone got the right neuro-rehabilitation, we could save vast amounts of money for the taxpayer. Is that not rather a good model for us to pursue?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and the constructive approach that the hon. Gentleman has taken on this subject with me over many months, and for years before that, shows the progress that we can make. We are putting £20.5 billion extra into the NHS, and making an uplift like that means
that we can turn resources towards preventing ill health in exactly the way that he describes. I pay tribute to the work that he has done on this subject.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Yesterday, the Chancellor boasted of a “jobs miracle”. If there is a jobs miracle, why is the chemotherapy unit at King George Hospital in my constituency closing because of a shortage of chemotherapy nurses?

Matt Hancock: We have a plan to improve the cancer workforce and to try to solve some of these problems. Maybe the hon. Gentleman should come over to this side and work with us to put record funding into the NHS. We can only have record funding for the NHS if we have a strong economy.

Mr Jayawardena: Is it not critical that every single penny put into the NHS is well spent if we are to tackle waste and bureaucracy, unlike what happened when Labour was in charge, when almost half was not spent on patient care?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People want to see more funding for our NHS, and they are going to get it, but they also want to see all the money being well spent.

The Budget confirms that the NHS is the Government’s No. 1 spending priority, just as it is the British people’s No.1 spending priority. This Budget places the Government four-square in the centre of British politics. It is progressive and optimistic and focused on the future, not just for the many but for the whole country that we serve.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I absolutely welcome the uplift to NHS funding, but will the Secretary of State answer a small technical question, please? In the Red Book, there are separate entries for the increases in the resource departmental expenditure limits for health and for NHS England? Can he confirm that the difference—£6.3 billion versus £7.2 billion—will not result in a transfer from Public Health England, from Health Education England or from capital budgets to fund the discrepancy? That has happened in the past.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I can confirm that. The £20.5 billion real-terms funding for the NHS in the Budget is for the NHS itself and will be channelled through NHS England. Of course there are budgets in the Department that are outside the NHS envelope, and they will be settled in the spending review. This is exactly as has been planned, and it was made clear in June. I can tell the House that the £20.5 billion is both the longest and the largest settlement for any public service in the history of this country.

Grahame Morris: We need to be precise and accurate about this, and I have just googled the settlement. In fact, the biggest ever increase in NHS funding happened between 1997 and 2008 when the budget went up from £55 billion to £125.4 billion—

Matt Hancock indicated dissent.

Grahame Morris: Well, I am talking about being factually correct. The biggest ever funding increase came under a Labour Government. Let us be honest about this.

Matt Hancock: This is a single settlement for a five-year period so that the NHS can plan again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Matt Hancock: I want to make some progress.

I received some representations about what we should do on NHS funding. One was from a John from Hillingdon, who called for a 2.2% increase in funding. John said that would make the NHS the “envy of the world”. Others may preach a gospel of envy, but we are getting on with building the NHS to be there for us all. The £20 billion increase I have talked about is not a 2.2% per year increase—it is 3.4% a year more over the next five years.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I acknowledge the Secretary of State’s contribution to funding the Midland Metro Hospital, which is very important to people in the Black country. However, given that NHS hospital trusts have cumulative debts of around £7.5 billion plus a further £5 billion or so of other debts, can he reassure us that the £20.5 billion will be used not just to pay debts but to provide extra services?

Matt Hancock: The £20.5 billion is just for day-to-day running costs—the resource costs. Of course there is a capital budget, too, which includes £4 billion of taxpayers’ money. That goes towards ensuring that we can get the capital built. The critical point is that we have not only that £20.5 billion uplift in running costs but a capital budget. We will make further announcements on the allocation of the capital budget later in the autumn.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for clarifying the £20.5 billion figure, which does not include training or capital. Of course, that contradicts the unhelpful briefing from Downing Street during the summer that it was something like £84 billion. Will he confirm that that £84 billion figure, which has been repeated in the media, is, as the Health Service Journal says, a fib, and that we are talking about £20.5 billion purely for resources in the NHS in England and Wales?

Matt Hancock: No. The £84 billion is the cash figure. The £20.5 billion is the real-terms increase by the end of the five years. If we add up all the extra money, we get £84 billion. It is there on page 36 of the Budget, if the hon. Lady wants to look. The biggest single cash increase comes next year, in 2019-20. It is all there in the Red Book.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for more good news for the Midlands in the form of £70 million for the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre just outside my constituency to help civilian rehabilitation. Can he share further details of that with us?
commitment for any public service in the history of this
spending. That is the biggest increase in any spending
What I can guarantee is a £20.5 billion increase in NHS
in battle can be adapted to help civilians here. I pay
NHS—for instance, surgical techniques that were learned
come back from the frontline can be brought into the
medical field from treating our brave troops who
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Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Here is a representation from a Jonathan from Leicester.
Further to the question from the Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), can the Secretary of State confirm that, in next year’s spending review, the cuts to
capital budgets and the £700 million-worth of cuts to
public health budgets will be reversed, and that there will be real-terms increases in funding for capital, training and
public health? Can he guarantee that?

Matt Hancock: The spending review is next year. What I can guarantee is a £20.5 billion increase in NHS spending. That is the biggest increase in any spending commitment for any public service in the history of this
country. It is a pity that the Leader of the Opposition is not interested and does not want to
hear about it. If he stayed, he could also hear about the reforms we are going to make. He should hear this more
than anyone. We are acutely aware on the Conservative Benches that this is not Government money or NHS
money but the hard-earned money of taxpayers, and we
need to ensure that it is spent wisely. When he sprays his
commitments around, Opposition Front Benchers would
do well to remember that this is money from taxpayers.

Mr Jayawardena: I welcome the fact that taxpayers’
money will be spread across the whole country, including
£10 million to support air ambulances, which provide vital
services in rural areas.

Matt Hancock: So many of us know just how important
air ambulance services are and the countless lives they
save. I am delighted that, on top of the £20.5 billion for
the NHS—the biggest ever, longest ever cash settlement
for any public service in history—there was £10 million
for air ambulances.

Neil O’Brien: If my right hon. Friend will excuse
another Leicestershire-based health intervention, I am
incredibly grateful for the creation of the new Cottage Hospital in Market Harborough, the gleaming new
A&E ward at Leicester Royal Infirmary and the decision to
save the brilliant children’s heart unit at Glenfield Hospital. Does he agree that that is a more welcome
record than the Labour party’s record of bankrupting the
country, giving us the biggest recession since the second world war and putting 1 million people on the
dole?

Matt Hancock: It is true that the Labour party in
office has always left unemployment higher than it
found it; it is true that, while Labour left the deficit
higher, we are bringing it down; and it is true that
inequality, too, is coming down. Page 5 of the distributional
analysis shows that, contrary to what we heard in that
paean of gloom from the shadow Chancellor, the biggest
rises in full-time employee gross weekly real earnings
over the last three years have been among the 10% least
well paid in our country. That is what this Conservative Government are doing—delivering for everybody in
our country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On inequalities, does the Secretary of State recognise
life expectancy is stalling under his Government?
In some regions it is getting worse. For women, it is
getting worse. Perhaps he can answer the question he
could not answer last week—why, for the first time in
100 years, do four babies in 1,000 not reach their first
birthday?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady knows, life expectancy
is increasing, and we are forecast to see an increasing
number of people live to a good old age. Indeed, the
number of people aged 75 and over is set to double in
the next 30 years. That is a brilliant achievement, which
is in part down to the hard work of our NHS. Cancer
survival rates are at a record high, strokes are down by a
third and deaths from heart failure are down by a
quarter. Of course, those successes have brought new
challenges. The biggest health challenge we face is that
people are living longer, often with multiple chronic
conditions. The money is only one part of the plan to
safeguard the NHS and ensure it is fit for the 21st century.
The Budget delivers the funding, and later this year we
will deliver the plan for how we will set the NHS fair for
the future.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have
very little hope for the older people of our country
given that the Government have cut £7 billion from the
social care budget and replaced it with only £240 million.
How is that safeguarding our old people for the future?

Matt Hancock: Of course, in Scotland social care is
devolved, so—[Interruption.] And in York, the amount of
money for social care is going up thanks to the
decisions announced yesterday.

Mr Jayawardena: Is it not true that Labour talk the
talk but do not walk the walk? They failed to deliver an
effective long-term solution for social care when they
were in government. They had 13 years to sort it and
did not. Is not it also true that, even though they
said they would use the comprehensive spending review
to address that, they left office without delivering? That
is what they do time and again.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.
The long-term plan needs to ensure that we address the
challenges of today and of tomorrow, including dementia,
obesity and the rise in mental ill health. It will set out
how we are going to address and deliver these changes.
The Government believe in an NHS that is free at the
point of use for everyone, for the long term.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The A&E in my
local hospital is deeply loved and I am very grateful that
it is staying; but it is still under huge pressure. When
I have been out at night with the emergency services, I
have seen that emergency services personnel have to
stay with someone who has an acute mental illness and
needs a mental health bed, which means that they cannot get on with other roles. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government’s strong announcement of more funding for mental health will help the whole NHS to do more?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we can only have a sustainable NHS if the social care system is also properly supported.

The social care Green Paper to be published later this year will set out the options to meet the unprecedented demographic challenge—and what a challenge. Some 70% of people in residential care homes now have dementia. The number of people with dementia is set to rise from 850,000 today to over 1 million in less than a decade. The number of people of working age in need of care is rising and is set to increase by almost half by 2035. Yet, despite these pressures, 83% of adult social care settings are now rated good or outstanding by the Care Quality Commission. That is the highest level since assessments began. As a society, we need to address the pressures on social care so that everyone can live in dignity and we can have a situation that is sustainable for the long term.

The Green Paper will bring forward a range of proposals to reform our social care system. I pay tribute to the excellent cross-party work of the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which are helping to build a consensus behind potential solutions. This is exactly the sort of long-term cross-party work that we need to see, when fair-minded people from across the House come together to address the challenges of the future, and I will work with anyone from any party to get this right.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I listened with care to my right hon. Friend’s very welcome remarks on yesterday’s “Today” programme about having parity of esteem between mental health and physical health, and I welcome the announcement in the Budget of £250,000 for children’s crisis centres. Sadly, people in society now have complex mental health problems at a younger and younger age. In order to make these policies work, will the Secretary of State ensure that there is a sufficient number of well trained staff in the NHS to deal with these mental health problems?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; he has put his finger on an incredibly important point. As we spend £20 billion extra on the NHS, we are going to ensure that we train up and attract the people who are going to do the caring.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On the issue of mental health support and services for children, I was quite disappointed that mental health support for schools was missing from the Budget. A lot of money was promised for child and adolescent mental health services but, as the Secretary of State will know, the Education Committee produced a joint report with the Health and Social Care Committee entitled “The Government’s Green Paper on mental health: failing a generation”, in which we outlined that we were really keen to see additional funding for mental health support in schools. Is there anything that the Minister can do to look again at that issue?

Matt Hancock: Yes—part of the £2 billion of extra mental health funding that we announced yesterday is to ensure that there is support in schools, particularly for young people. That is one of the elements of the funding that we announced in the Budget yesterday, and I am very happy to talk to the hon. Lady about the details.

The social care Green Paper will address the question of long-term funding reform for social care and how we can help people to plan sensibly so they do not have to fear the risk of losing everything. But the Green Paper will not just look at funding; it will also look at the role of housing, at how we can combine a home with high-quality care, and at the links between the care of children and of the elderly. I have seen how such links can benefit both groups, helping children’s development and tackling the scourge of loneliness that elderly people too often face. The Green Paper will of course also look at how we can better integrate the NHS and the social care system. What matters is what works, so we will look at things such as auto-enrolment, and how and if reforms elsewhere can be applied to social care. Like the NHS, the future of our social care system rests not just on funding, but on reform, and we are determined to rise to this challenge.

Every Member of this House will have their own personal story of the NHS. Whether it was the first few breaths of a child or the final few moments of a loved one, from cradle to grave that care is ever present, whatever the shade of Government. This Government want to ensure that that care will always be there for whoever needs it, and that the NHS remains free at the point of delivery. That is why we are putting the extra £20 billion into the NHS. It is only because our economy is strong, employment is rising and we believe in a free market economy that we can fund this increase, for just as there can only be truth when there is freedom of speech, so can there only be prosperity to fund public services when there is freedom of enterprise. It is a great sadness that, in stark contrast with the greats of his party in the past, the shadow Chancellor opposes both. It is now a combination that we can only get under a progressive, optimistic, future-focused Conservative Government. That is what this Budget delivers. I commend it to the House.

1.56 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is an honour to speak for the Scottish National party on the second day of the 2018 Budget debate.

Ten years ago last month, Lehman Brothers collapsed. Excessive risk-taking by financial institutions created an international banking crisis, and a global downturn followed. Since then, people and families across the UK have had to pay for the fall-out. There has been a decade of wage stagnation, a decade of cuts and a decade of the most vulnerable in our society being hit the hardest by Tory austerity. Looking forward, we are staring into the abyss that is Brexit. Mark Carney says that Brexit has already cost householders an average of £900, and the Fraser of Allander Institute estimates that leaving the single market and customs union would
cost 80,000 Scottish jobs. After a decade of austerity, households cannot afford to lose £900 each, and they certainly cannot afford a Tory Brexit.

The reality is that the people of Scotland are badly served by Westminster. We did not vote for a Tory Government and we did not vote for Brexit. I cannot think of a time in the past when a country has committed such a foreseeable act of economic self-harm. The Chancellor does not believe that we will be better off after Brexit. Even the Prime Minister does not believe that we will be better off after Brexit. We were promised £350 million pounds a week for public services. We will not be bought off with a commemorative 50p coin.

**Sir Edward Davey:** The hon. Lady is making an excellent start to her speech. Does she agree that, after a decade of Lehman austerity, we could be facing a decade of Brexit austerity?

**Kirsty Blackman:** I absolutely agree. An economic catastrophe is coming down the line as a result of Brexit. It does not matter what kind of Brexit there is; any Brexit is bad for the economy. Staying in the EU is the best possible option for the economy. If we cannot stay in the EU, staying in the single market and the customs union is the second best option.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Further to that point, did my hon. Friend notice in the Red Book that the expected growth that the UK will achieve in the next four to five years equals that of Ireland in only one year? Is that example not a clear signpost to all in Scotland and elsewhere that independence has worked for Ireland and is going to work for Scotland, and that the sooner we get it and the sooner we are clear of this lot, the better?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Absolutely; it is clear that remaining part of the UK is bad for Scotland’s economy. The comparators in the Budget information documents show that the UK economy is growing slower than the EU economy is set to grow in every but one of the next five years.

**Matt Hancock:** May I just ask whether the hon. Lady has ever seen the result of a referendum that she likes?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Do you know what? The reality is that we have argued for a very long time—I have argued for my entire adult life—against the current democratic system, because it does not work for the people of Scotland. We do not get the Governments we vote for and we do not get the result that we voted for in the EU referendum. If the democratic system meant that Scotland’s votes were reflected in reality, we would be in a very different situation today.

On a serious note, every week in our communities and at our surgeries MPs from both sides of the House are faced with the consequences of Westminster’s poor decisions. We see working mothers forced to go to food banks. We see and hear about the Home Office-enforced separation of families. We meet young men struggling with mental health problems who have been sanctioned yet again because they are unable to jump through the unreasonable hoops put in their way by the Department for Work and Pensions. I do not know how anybody, even in this Westminster Government, can believe that their policies are having a positive benefit. The tears and desperation with which we are all faced on a regular basis give the lie to that notion.

The Chancellor has failed adequately to fund our public services in this Budget. He has failed to undo the devastating social security cuts, he has failed to legislate for a real living wage and he has failed to provide adequate support for businesses facing the impending cliff edge of Brexit.

The Budget should have included decisions to help support all those who have been hit by a decade of austerity, and all those who will be hit by the forthcoming Brexit. The roll-out of universal credit should have been halted. A third of working-age households will be entitled to some universal credit. Of those, around a third will be at least £1,000 a year worse off than under the legacy system.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government missed an opportunity in the Budget yesterday not only to correct the injustices of universal credit but to compensate councils such as Highland Council that are having to foot a £2.5 million bill out of council tax funds simply for administering this failed and shambolic universal credit roll-out?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Absolutely. The Highland Council area has been particularly badly hit as one of the first areas in which universal credit was rolled out. It is currently rolling out in Aberdeen, and I am hugely concerned about the impact it will have on my constituents. The roll-out needs to be halted, because the issues that happened in the highlands and elsewhere have not been fixed, and they need to be fixed before any further roll-out can occur.

The benefits freeze should have been lifted, the sanctions regime should be scrapped, support for lone parents under the age of 25 must be reintroduced and the WASPI issue must be sorted, with those women being given the money they are owed. I am pleased that the Government have made a commitment to the pensions dashboard, but they now need to legislate to compel companies to comply so that people can access information about the pensions they are owed, and so that they can then get those pensions. That is important, and lots of people have been calling for it.

Workers’ rights are another reserved issue, and the Chancellor should have committed to increasing the minimum wage to the living wage—an amount people have been calling for it. The Scottish Government are doing all they can, particularly for staff employed in public sector roles, but we need the powers to do more. In Scotland, our Government have focused on uplifting the pay packets of the lowest paid, which is a progressive choice that makes the most positive difference. The UK Government have not chosen to do that.

We have fought long and hard for a single, real living wage rate. The UK Government need to recognise that it does not cost a 24-year-old less to live than it costs a
25-year-old. If the Chancellor will not make the required commitment to a real living wage for all, he should devolve it so that we can.

Statutory paternity leave should be doubled from two to four weeks, giving fathers even more opportunity to bond with their babies. A complete review of parental leave should be undertaken, including consideration of the start date of maternity leave, especially when a baby is born prematurely.

We propose that the Government set up a labour participation committee to consider groups that are currently under-represented or over-represented in certain sectors, and to examine barriers to work for women, disabled people, parents and other marginalised groups.

The Institute of Directors has called for a pot to be set aside so that small and medium-sized enterprises can bid for advice on how to cope with Brexit. The UK Government’s advice thus far has been wholly inadequate, and we have only five months to go until the UK crashes out of the EU.

Businesses need to be able to access finance in order to grow. To do that, they need to have trust in financial institutions and, crucially, financial institutions need to earn that trust. The Chancellor should have committed to setting up a tribunal service so that those affected by business banking fraud—through the Royal Bank of Scotland’s global restructuring group, Lloyds Bank, Halifax Bank of Scotland or others—can seek affordable redress, rather than having to go through a court process that is too expensive to access.

The UK Government must also ensure that current EU funding will continue until the end of the current multi-annual financial framework. Scotland must not be any worse off in respect of the funding allocations that replace those provided from the EU, and any arrangements must fully respect devolution and must be put in place with the consultation and agreement of the Scottish Parliament.

The Chancellor had an opportunity to make a commitment to the oil and gas sector deal, and he failed to do so. Our industry needs the deal to be signed off now, particularly with the impending lack of access to labour and investment following Brexit. I am pleased that he has heeded calls to make a clear statement on the future fiscal regime, because we cannot have unforeseen, sudden tax hikes like those made by previous Chancellors.

The other part of the jigsaw that is missing is a commitment to reducing the harmful climate change effects of the use of fossil fuels. In 2015, the UK Government cancelled their £1 billion carbon capture and storage competition, just six months before it was due to be awarded, after spending £100 million on it. That left Peterhead—a key candidate for support—behind. After three years of research and development, we have missed out on this vital industry of the future. The UK Government need to make an unequivocal commitment to supporting the development of CCS.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about carbon capture, and about the betrayal of the £1 billion project at Peterhead. Does she agree that, if the UK Government are serious about meeting the climate change targets under the Paris agreement, spending £100 million now, when we are behind the pace after abandoning a three-year £1 billion project, is just not good enough?

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. The potential benefits of CCS are unquestionable and, as my hon. Friend says, we need to get ahead of the curve again. We need the UK Government to commit to putting the money in now. That is especially important because their pulling the plug means there is now a lack of trust among the companies that are developing CCS. The UK Government need to make a clear and unequivocal commitment.

On evolving technologies, Scotland is a global leader in tidal, and the UK Government must work with the Scottish Government on the contract for difference process to support the technology journey from development to commercialisation, which is particularly important for tidal.

On solar power, we have been contacted by so many individuals who are concerned about what is happening to export tariffs for homes, small businesses and community energy projects from next April. The tariff is a vital support that encourages people to invest in solar power, and it must continue.

Lastly, in order to reduce climate change and to increase the use of healthier methods of transport, this Budget was an opportunity to reduce VAT on bikes. Just as we would like to see VAT removed from digital books, reducing VAT on bikes would make them cheaper for all and would be a real statement of intent from the Government on reducing climate change.

Sir Robert Syns: (Poole) (Con): Is the hon. Lady not aware that reducing VAT is very difficult while we are a member of the European Union, but it is something that we might be able to do after Brexit?

Kirsty Blackman: Actually, reducing VAT is quite possible for a member of the EU. Zero rating things is a problem, but reducing VAT is fine.

The Scottish fire and rescue service and Police Scotland are still owed £175 million of VAT. The UK Government have recognised that the system they had in place was unfair, yet they have refused to pay back the £175 million they owe our two vital life-saving industries. It would be incredibly useful if they could see their way to giving us back that £175 million.

On the subject of the UK Government reallocating funds that should rightly have gone to Scotland, the convergence uplift of £160 million should have been paid to Scottish farmers. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has admitted that the money has been spent elsewhere. We need a commitment that this money will come to Scotland in future years, and we need the previous years’ money to come to Scotland now, so that our farmers can have the cash they have been allocated.

I am pleased that the Budget includes measures to ensure that companies pay their fair share of tax in the digital sphere, but the reality is that this is a consultation and the measures are not going to be in place yet. We also do not have a solid idea of what those measures will be. The Scottish National party would therefore like to propose two measures on digital taxation, and we hope that the Government will take them into account.
First, we believe that online retailers should be held liable for tax fraud committed by their suppliers. Sometimes when people order a product from a well-known online retailer it is delivered from China with a customs declaration and a stamp that says “gift”. Large online retailers should be held responsible for ensuring that those who use their platform pay the correct customs duties. We also believe that in order to combat tech firms that avoid corporation tax by registering implausibly low UK profits, the Chancellor should levy corporation tax on an assumed UK share of worldwide profits that is equal to their UK share of worldwide revenue. That could be subject to a dispute tribunal process to ensure fairness. The SNP will submit these suggestions in the consultation process, and we hope that they will be considered seriously.

Scotland’s cities have received city deal funding from both the UK and Scottish Governments. That is welcome, but what is not welcome is the fact that the UK Government have contributed far less to those deals than the Scottish Government. In total, the Tories have failed to match more than £350 million of Scottish Government funding for city deals and growth deals in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness, Stirling and Clackmannanshire, Tay Cities and Edinburgh. We believe that they should match our contribution, and we call on the Chancellor to make that commitment, as well as to fulfill the Chief Secretary to the Treasury’s commitment to provide each part of Scotland with a regional deal.

I come to an ask, for the NHS, that would require only a small financial contribution but would have significant positive benefits. The UK Government could have used this Budget to follow Scotland’s lead on PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis. In Scotland, PrEP is available on the NHS, but England has been dragging its heels on making it available. The benefits in terms of the reduction in new cases of HIV are unchallengeable, and it is not fair that those in England cannot currently access the drug on the NHS. That change would not cost a huge amount of money, but it would make a massive difference to people’s lives.

If the UK Government are serious about taking their place on the global stage, they need to reform the immigration system. Countries will be looking for a more flexible immigration policy before signing trade deals with us, and we should start by getting rid of the fees that EU citizens will be expected to pay to acquire settled status. The OBR mentions the ageing population at many points throughout the Blue Book. The UK Government must recognise this challenge, and recognise that we need and want people to come to live and work in our communities. Last year’s Red Book said that a reduction in net migration of 20,000 would reduce GDP by about 0.2% by 2022. The Government need to be honest about the benefits of immigration and be clear that it is good for our country. They need to be clear that, with an ageing population, it is incredibly important that we get people to come to work here, particularly in the care sector and in the NHS. We also need a more flexible working visa policy that gives those who are seeking asylum the right to work, as the current system is dehumanising and unsustainable. Lastly, we should scrap the fees paid that families have to pay to get their children citizenship, which are ridiculously high and are yet another tax on families.

On health spending, the UK Government gave commitment after commitment that they would pass the full Barnett consequentials of the increased health spending on to Scotland, but they have chosen not to do so. They have chosen to short-change Scotland by £50 million. This comes on top of the fact that the Scottish Government’s fiscal resource block grant allocation will be almost £2 billion—or 6.9%—lower in real terms than it was in 2010-11. Despite the addition of consequentials and other non-Barnett allocations in 2019-20 that the Chancellor announced, Scotland’s fiscal resource block grant is still lower in real terms than it was in 2010-11 and at the start of the current spending review in 2015-16.

The Chancellor had the chance to make a real difference. He had political choices to make and at almost every turn he chose the wrong path. Is it any wonder that people do not trust the Tories? This Government need to follow the lead of the Scottish Government, who have put dignity and respect at the heart of decision making, rather than punishing those who are not born rich. The reality is that people in Scotland are faced with a choice of two futures: they can choose to continue to have a Westminster Government, who make political choices that disadvantage those who can least afford it; or they can fight for a fairer Scotland, where our Parliament has the powers and the responsibility to make choices on behalf of our citizens—choices that will make our country fairer, not create further inequality.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We now have a seven-minute limit on speeches.

2.15 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): This is my ninth Budget in this place, and the majority of them have been framed by the fact that my party has had to clean up the mess left behind by the previous Labour Government in 2010. They have been framed by the comments of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who wrote:

“I’m afraid there is no money. Kind regards—and good luck!”

That was the position that the country found itself in. I feel that yesterday’s Budget was a turning point and we are now starting to see light at the end of the tunnel. We need to give great thanks to the people of this country for their hard work and their determination to see the course through. Yesterday’s Budget means we are now starting to repay the faith of the British people.

I want to focus on three areas, the first of which is public services. The Chancellor was clear yesterday—he was right—that local government had made a significant contribution to tackling the deficit. I firmly believe it needs to be recognised for that, and we need to make sure it is properly funded. I welcome the £650 million package for social care that was announced yesterday, and the £420 million for roads and potholes that will be going to local government.

I also welcome the fact that for probably the first time ever road tax will be paying for our roads rather than being spent on other things. As a consequence, the budget for Highways England will go up by 40%. It is great to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State
for Health and Social Care in the Chamber because I warmly welcome the additional £20 billion that this Government are committing to our NHS each and every year. I look forward to seeing the 10-year plan for the NHS and, within that, the use of the £2 billion for mental health services, which are crucial. Mental health provision is important because the mental health challenges we are experiencing underpin many of the social challenges that we face in this country, so it will be great to see his proposals.

Security is the most important thing for and the first duty of any Government, so I really welcome the extra £1 billion for our armed forces and the £160 million that is going into counter-terrorism policing. I noted that the Chancellor referred to the police and the challenges our forces face in his Budget statement, so I hope that when the police settlement comes forward early next year, we will see positive progress. My local Warwickshire force is taking on additional officers, but it also faces challenges down the track, such as the pensions revaluation. I sincerely hope that that will be reflected in the policing settlement.

Sir Edward Davey: While the hon. Gentleman is talking about police funding, can he explain why he thinks the Chancellor did not announce any extra money, beyond the counter-terrorism policing increase, for community policing yesterday?

Mr Jones: Clearly the police have been given access this year to an additional £450 million, and an extra £160 million was given to counter-terrorism policing. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman, who was part of the coalition Government, will recognise that a process needs to be followed and that the police funding settlement will come forward in a few months’ time.

Secondly, on the cost of living, I am delighted that the Chancellor has chosen to freeze fuel duty again. It has not increased in this country since 2011, which is good news for motorists. In that time, the average motorist has saved £1,000 as a result of the decisions made by Conservative Chancellors. I am also really pleased that the rail companies have taken up the railcard for 26 to 30-year-olds, who will get a 30% reduction in fares.

I very much welcome the increase to the personal allowance. The lowest paid will now earn £12,500 before they have to pay income tax. That is a far cry from the £6,500 personal allowance in 2010, and it means that those people will have an additional £1,250 a year in their pockets compared with then. I also welcome the change to the 40p threshold, because although that rate is an important aspect of our tax system, many public servants, such as police sergeants and senior teachers, have been dragged into the 40p rate, as have been many tradespeople such as bricklayers. I do not think that that was ever the intention when that measure was introduced.

It is good to see the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), on the Front Bench, because I welcome the universal credit changes, which will further underpin the principle that it always pays to work. It is excellent that £1.7 billion will be put into universal credit year on year, and that is in addition to last year’s package. It looks as though tweaks are being made to the system constantly to make sure that it responds to some of the challenges. I hope that another look will be taken at the assessment period, because several of my constituents have had challenges with that part of the process.

Finally, on high streets, I am delighted that 30% will be knocked off rates bills for people who own small retail businesses with a rateable value under £51,000. Business rates are an analogue tax in a digital world, and I am pleased that the Chancellor has started to recognise that. I recognise that larger retailers occupying anchor positions in high streets and town centres will not benefit from that change, so perhaps in future we will need to consider those businesses, too. A £675 million fund for the regeneration of our high streets is a massive start to help high streets throughout the country to regenerate. We need to make sure that we preserve our high streets, but not in their current form. We need to make them fit for the 21st century because they are places of massive community value. They are the community centre of towns and cities throughout the country.

2.23 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The House of Commons Library tells me that I have listened to Budgets in the House 44 times, so I hope I am an experienced Budget evaluator. I always come to the Chamber to listen to the Budget, and I base my evaluation of its quality on two criteria. The first is the great global issues that we face, which for me are always the fragile planet, the environment, climate change and global warming, and the fact that the planet’s burgeoning population has to be fed, and fed sustainably. We also face the challenge of keeping the peace. Many of us thought that that could be taken for granted, but in the current global circumstances, keeping the peace has become a great concern for us all.

My second criterion for evaluating a Budget is what it will do for my constituents. I believe that I have a sacred duty to come here and represent my constituents, and to make sure that everything that I do—the contribution that my colleagues and I make in the House—adds to the welfare, health and prosperity of my constituents. Those are the twin criteria, and on both I believe that this is an uninspiring little Budget. It is lacking in passion, leadership and values. That is my sincere criticism of the Budget.

Let me go into a little more detail. I have been in the House at times when the country has been in great crisis. At a time of crisis, I have seen people whom one would have thought were pretty ordinary politicians suddenly stepping up to the Dispatch Box and showing the world that they had leadership quality, that they understood what was going on in the wider world, and that they could stand up to do the right thing. I take umbrage at the fact that a Chancellor of the Exchequer could stand in the Chamber yesterday and call the cataclysm of 2009 and the global meltdown of the world economy “Labour’s great recession.” I have to say that it must have been a very powerful Labour party and Labour Government who caused the world recession. What rubbish that the man who is supposed to be our Chancellor of the Exchequer could say such a thing—shame on him!
I saw Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling at that Dispatch Box, calm in the face of a hurricane in the world economy. They stood there and made the right decisions. They bailed out the selfish banks. They did that which was necessary to save our country. This bunch over on the Government Benches should not tell us how to rise to our responsibilities. We showed leadership. We showed that we had the values. We worked incessantly to get this country back on track.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): We understand that there was a global banking crisis, but is it not right that the Labour Government did not prepare the country for problems that might occur, given their chronic overspending of money that we just did not have, which left us in a great deal of debt when the recession happened?

Mr Sheerman: I hear what the hon. Lady says, but let us be serious. I recommend that she goes away and looks at a rather good book that I have recently read called “Reckless Endangerment: How Oustsized Ambition, Greed, and Corruption Led to Economic Armageddon” by Gretchen Morgenson. Read it and learn it, because that was what we came through.

The Chancellor’s remarks yesterday did not really touch on many of the issues that affect my community. The fact is that we have a hospital in danger that suffers due to a private finance initiative scheme. All the Chancellor said was that Labour was responsible for PFI. I have been here long enough to know that the great charm offensive on PFIs was led by John Major. PFIs were the fashion among Members on all Benches. As Chairman of the Education Committee, I saw good PFIs and bad PFIs, but I also saw a lot of smart City types who danced rings around local authorities and local health authorities and gave them a rotten deal. That is the truth of PFIs—there were good ones and bad ones, but a lot of City spivs made a lot of money out of them. Nothing that the Chancellor said yesterday will rescue my local hospital and health trust from that burden.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 90% of all PFIs were signed under a Labour Government? Yesterday the Chancellor took steps to make sure that there will be no more.

Mr Sheerman: The Chancellor took no steps to help those parts of the country that are in trouble due to PFIs.

Watching the television and reading the papers, my constituents are not fooled: they know that what was left out yesterday was that whatever Brexit deal is struck, it will not be as good as staying in the European Union—that is the truth of it. I come here to represent my constituents, and I know that we are moving towards a disaster for our health living standards, their health standards and everything else that will touch their lives over the coming years. This is a year of crisis. Just as we had the crisis of the great depression and the crisis in 2009, this will be the next crisis, and we need people at the Dispatch Box who will take on their role as leaders. I do not mean people such as the former Prime Minister and Chancellor who, when they lost the referendum, ran away from their responsibilities and from leadership. Where are they now? Writing for the Evening Standard I suppose, or writing their memoirs in their man caves.

Being in this House and representing our constituents is a grave responsibility. The job does not come and go—we do not want people who try a bit of time as Chancellor of the Exchequer and a bit of time as Prime Minister but then disappear. The great people who have been at that Dispatch Box are the people who have had values, showed leadership, and led this country in good time and in bad times. The fact of the matter is that we are heading for a very bad time indeed if we leave the European Union on bad terms, but that was not mentioned. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, at this time of crisis and impending disaster for our country, did not have the courage to mention Brexit more than once—that is the truth, and my constituents want me to say that today.

At this time of the year, I am, like many in the Chamber, wearing my poppy. I have just been reading a lovely new history about the first world war. The fact is that right in the middle of that war, everybody knew that it was unwinnable and that more and more young men were going to die. Of course, the real responsibility for the first world war lies with us—the politicians. Politicians failed the people of this country. German politicians failed their people, as did French politicians. It was politicians who did it, and they went on killing more and more young people. That was a failure of leadership, a failure of values, a failure of responsibility and a failure to make courageous decisions at the Dispatch Box. We are heading in that direction—not particularly into war, but into the most troubled times when our people will come out impoverished, miserable and unhappy. That will hurt their health, their education and their chance of a good life. For my part, I will do everything that I can to stop the disaster that those on the Government Benches have wished on our people.

2.32 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Last year, after the disappointment of the general election manifesto process, I left the Government in order to make the case that we needed to make this a moment of much bolder national renewal, that we needed to move on from the first phase of reducing the deficit through a programme of austerity and that we needed to set a trajectory of higher growth, more public sector enterprise and innovation, and wage increases and tax cuts focused on the poorest—those on the lowest incomes—in our society. Let me start by saying that I strongly welcome the Chancellor’s Budget for all those reasons. He managed to square an almost impossible circle in a clever Budget that has done something important for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

As a constituency MP, I wish to mention in particular the measures to support the high street. In Mid Norfolk, as in many other rural constituencies, we have seen our high streets hit hard by a big transfer to online retail without the digital giants paying tax in return, and I welcome the measures that the Government have taken to support our high streets. In particular, in health and care day of the Budget debate, I want to highlight the £10 billion put aside for social care; the extraordinary announcement, which I strongly welcome, of the launch of the first mental health emergency service; the £10,000 for every primary school and £50,000 for every secondary school; the £400 million a year for our schools; and the £2 billion to make sure that universal credit is properly
funded. These, I suggest, are compassionate steps taken by a Government still paying off the legacy of the appalling inheritance from the Labour party, but doing so in a way that tries to put the needs of the most vulnerable in society first.

All of that is made possible because of the extraordinary economic success over which we have managed to preside. It pains Opposition Members, which is why they are all looking away, that the rate of real income growth has been rising. In the next five years, the OBR forecasts that there will be a bigger real-terms rise in real incomes for the lowest paid than for anybody else, and 3 million new jobs. This is a success story, and nothing tells us how important it is more than the howls of derision from the Opposition, so upset are they that more and more people in this country are not in need of Labour party support. People are coming to us because they know that ours is the party that supports growth.

I want to acknowledge that after eight very painful years, there is a weariness afoot among both those on the frontline of public services, who have tightened their belts, and the lowest-paid people in work. Those two groups have tightened their belts far more than those in plum jobs in government, in Whitehall, or even in local government. We need, as a House, to say to them that they have earned it and to send a very sincere thank you. The British people have tightened their belts far harder than the Government have in the past eight years.

Talking of public sector workers and the need for public sector leadership, I want to thank the Chancellor for announcing the new public sector leadership academy—an academy to support those on the frontline of public services, who have one of the hardest jobs in our society. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) might say that is rubbish, but that is because she has never had to run anything. The people on the frontline of our public services are actually running very complex public services. They, alongside the lowest-paid people in work, are the people to whom we need to support in the next five years in tightening the belt and delivering the innovation and efficiency that the public want to see.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I note that the hon. Gentleman said that I have never had to run anything. I wonder whether he would like to change his mind given that I ran a crime management centre in a police station and two incredibly busy departments in a busy hospital. Perhaps he would like to correct the record.

George Freeman: I will happily correct that bit of the record, as long as the hon. Lady welcomes the public sector leadership academy, because, given her experience, she will know how important it is.

If we are really to tackle the structural legacy of the 13 years of a Labour Government that led to the biggest economic crisis in this country’s peacetime history— [Interruption.] That is a reality that Labour Members now shout down because it is inconvenient. The crisis that a new generation of voters needs to be consistently reminded of was the legacy of 13 years of a Labour Government. If we are to tackle that, we will have to do two important things: yes, we must continue to drive the modernisation of public service, but we must also increase the rate of growth and revenue generation in the economy by the Government. Even more powerfully, over the next five years we need somehow to make those two ambitions work together. I would like to share some thoughts on how we might do that.

The truth is that our growth rate has dropped since the EU referendum, from 3% to 1.5%. Therefore the first thing that we need to do is to get a good Brexit deal for business confidence. I hope that the Opposition will take the opportunity of the forthcoming Brexit votes to put the needs of business, prosperity and the economy ahead of ideology or party politics. We also need to create an environment in which we can unlock business investment in this country. There is £600 billion tied up on businesses’ balance sheets, and we need to trigger the confidence needed to unlock that money in the post-Brexit dividend. We will not get it unless the Brexit deal gives business the certainty that it needs in the years ahead.

We also need to go much faster on infrastructure. I am delighted that, at this point, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has entered the Chamber, because for eight years she and I have been holding meetings to try to accelerate funding for the Ely rail junction. I want the Treasury now to recognise that, across the country, there are infrastructure schemes that could be funded by private finance. I am talking not about PFI, but about giving local authorities and mayors powers to set up infrastructure bonds to create more innovative ways of driving investment into our public services. If we regenerated rail links and rail lines, gave planning permission for stations and developed innovative schemes for capturing the value increase around those lines, we could harness that growth to fund new models of infrastructure.

I particularly welcome the Government’s continued emphasis, through the industrial strategy, on fields such as life sciences, robotics and artificial intelligence so that we can create in this country the research platform needed to support the creation of the jobs and businesses of tomorrow. But if we are to be more than just a research economy—if we are to be a genuine innovation nation that pulls innovation through into practice—we need an economy that uses innovation in the private and public sectors. The great trick is to harness the power of innovation in our public services, and nowhere more than in the NHS. If we are really to lead the world in digital health and digital medicine, and the extraordinary revolution that that offers, we will not do it with an NHS running on paper and cardboard. We need to make the NHS a genuine catalyst for UK leadership in digital health. It is the same in genomics. When I set up the UK genomics programme, the idea was not only that we would launch the world’s first genomic medicines service in the NHS, which we have, but crucially that, in so doing, we would make this country a leader in genomic research and life science investment.

This, in the end, is the key to getting out of the debt that we inherited from the Labour party—the high-debt, low-growth model that yesterday’s Budget acknowledged. We have to somehow unlock innovation in our public services and drive much higher rates of growth in the private sector. With Brexit coming to its resolution here in this House in the next few weeks, we have to make it a catalyst for the renaissance of innovation and enterprise, and the moment at which we set out a vision for public services in the 21st century.
2.41 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I was really shocked when the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) said that there is weariness. It was Halloween yesterday, and that Budget was damn scary, never mind wearily. As for asking public sector workers to tighten their belts, it was not about tightening their belts—it was about going and accessing food banks. That is what that Budget was about, and what the Government continue to be about.

I sat here yesterday listening attentively to the Chancellor delivering his Budget. I was not holding my breath given this Government’s track record on breaking their promises, but I am ever an optimist, so I still sat here in hope: hoping, on behalf of my constituents of Bradford West, for this Government to deliver on their all-singing and—dare I say it?—all-dancing “end of austerity” Budget. Alas, even the Chancellor’s self-deprecating humour could not mask the reality of yet more broken promises.

No doubt we will hear from many colleagues, as we have heard before, about what this Budget really means and how it has failed to redress the balance and the crisis in the health and social care sector, with no end in sight under the Conservatives. But for now I want to talk about young people, and particularly their mental health. That is not only because I come from the great city of Bradford, which will have the youngest population in the whole of Europe by 2020, but because, as a former chair of a large mental health charity and a former NHS commissioner, I have an acute understanding of the realities that this Government continue to fail to grasp. They fail to listen to charities such as Barnardo’s, which has warned the Government that they are sleepwalking into a crisis.

Throughout this country we have seen a huge increase in the number of young people, in particular, suffering from mental health issues. Just a few weeks ago in my constituency, I met George Zito. George and his colleagues work to provide positive mental health training across schools in Bradford. George explained to me that 8,500 young people across Bradford have been diagnosed with mental health disorders, but the number with lower-level concerns is estimated to be at least double that. Implementing mental health specialist departments in every large NHS A&E is one way of tackling the crisis in mental health at the last stage, but we cannot afford to provide just last-minute crisis rescue for people’s mental health disorders, as the Government are currently doing with their Brexit negotiations.

When 50% of mental health problems are established by the age of 14, and 75% by the age of 24, making young people’s mental health a priority allows us to prevent future life problems for a whole generation. The Children’s Society has expressed concern that the Government’s plans for improving children’s mental health more generally are moving too slowly. With only one in four children being reached by school-based mental health teams in the next five years, there was nothing in the Budget to address that. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned earlier that is extremely disappointing that the Government did not put extra resource into schools to provide counsellors who can effectively tackle low levels of wellbeing and support children with poor mental health.

The reality on the ground is that people like George Zito from my constituency will not get the resources they need, and little will be done to help reach young people with mental health issues in their schools. With this Budget, the two-year waiting times for young people trying to see a specialist counsellor for issues to do with mental health will remain to a large extent in Bradford West. The Chancellor decided it was okay to trick the young in my constituency facing issues with mental health while his Budget could treat the wealthiest, who are 14 times more likely to benefit from it than the poor.

Between 2012 and 2016, this Government’s cuts led to a loss of 600 youth centres, 3,500 youth workers, and 140,000 youth centre places for young people. This Budget does nothing at all to resolve the loss of those services. It not only neglects young people’s need for direct access to mental health counsellors in their schools but, given the minimal youth services available, leaves them with little or no face-to-face support. Although I sincerely welcome the Chancellor’s cash injection of £2 billion, which has been referred to on more than a few occasions, I am afraid that it just does not cut it for my constituents, or for young people up and down the country. The Institute for Public Policy Research suggests that almost £4.1 billion is the actual figure needed to meet the necessary provision of mental health services.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): In situations where there are no beds in acute mental health wards, public funds are being used to pay for private beds in private hospitals. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a good use of public funds?

Naz Shah: I absolutely share those concerns about that expenditure when we are not investing in the infrastructure we need. What we heard yesterday, and more of today, was sticking plaster options—those are the only solutions that this Government have come up with. That is one thing that the Conservatives are absolutely the masters of—saying, “We are investing £2 billion, but actually we stripped you of £5 billion the week before.” It just cannot work like that.

My concerns remain as valid as they were before the Chancellor stood up yesterday and delivered his Halloween frighteners, because the truth remains that once again this Government are using their mastery of applying sticking plasters to try to hold together a wound that they have inflicted and that, quite frankly, is not healing. The tricks in his bag were exactly those, delivered by the Chancellor on behalf of a Tory Government who are now a master of disguise. Yesterday, the Chancellor liked to refer to himself as Fiscal Phil. Although it may be humorous for the Chancellor to half-pronounce his name, it is catastrophic for this whole country when his Budget does not even half halt austerity, half provide the provision needed for mental health services, or go halfway towards providing the parity of esteem that his own Government have been promising.

With the Chancellor suggesting that he will put an emergency Budget before Parliament in the event of a no-deal Brexit, a few things come to mind. Is the Minister willing to provide assurances that the extra funding for mental health will not be swallowed up, that there will not be cuts, and that the Prime Minister’s failure to negotiate a Brexit deal will not mean collateral damage for those suffering the most?
Finally, I want to talk about the investment in the public sector leadership academy, which the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk mentioned. I concur: I absolutely value that investment. However, the problem is that it is those very public sector leaders who are having to deal with austerity. For example, there is the former chair of Solace in Doncaster, who has written an article about it. In Northamptonshire, the Tory council is having to go through bankruptcy. There is nothing wrong with the people involved as leaders. What is wrong is the cards that they are dealt in having to cut services and make decisions every single day of the week about whether a woman is not going to get a bed for the night following domestic violence, a child is not going to get a CAMHS referral, or a child is going to take home a begging letter from their school because there is not enough funding and it cannot afford food. That is the reality of austerity, and it needs to stop now.

2.49 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye in this important Budget debate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I would like to begin by welcoming the Chancellor’s statement and recognising that UK public finances are in a much better shape than they were. Despite the narrative of negativity from the Opposition, the economic facts demonstrate a much more positive reality. I thought the Opposition might welcome the fact that average real wage growth in the public sector is now 3.1%—a 10-year high—or that the Chancellor is predicting an additional 400,000 people in work by 2023. That is on top of the 3 million extra jobs we have created in the last 10 years or so. But nothing came from the Opposition, except that they have 39 uncosted expenditure pledges. That is irresponsible public policy making.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) said, we need to build on the high-tech areas of our economy, such as AI, where we are world leaders. We need to ask ourselves why, when we can do the innovation in this country—for example, inventing the world wide web—large IT companies such as Google did not emerge in this country. We need to concentrate on the high-tech sectors of the economy. As my hon. Friend said, that is the way to build ourselves out of the debt created by previous Governments. We need to encourage more students from around the world—the brightest and the best—to come to our universities to study subjects such as computer sciences, so that our universities are at the world forefront of this much needed research.

We need to relentlessly pursue a growth strategy post Brexit. I was delighted that the Chancellor was able to release some of his cushion in this Budget. I hope that we get a deal; I am optimistic that we will get a deal and that this Parliament will pass it. We can then move forward. Businesses that are currently shelving investment decisions will make those decisions and the economy will start to thrive.

One thing we can do in the post-Brexit era is to look carefully at the business rates system. I held an Adjournment debate on that earlier this month, in which I pointed out that business rates are not necessarily related to the ability to pay. There are some unfair quirks in the business rates system. For example, a business with a rateable value of under £12,000 gets small business rate relief, but if someone has two businesses with a rateable value of, say, £3,000 each, they get no small business rate relief for either of them.

I welcome the fact that the Government have put £900 million into the rating system, but again, that is a sticking plaster over a system that needs to be thoroughly reformed. I also welcome the fact that there is a third off business rates for retailers with a rateable value of up to £51,000 and a fund for the sustainable transformation of high streets.

Perhaps the most important thing that we need to look at in public services over the next few years is education. As I have alluded to, education is the way that we will be at the forefront of innovation in this country. I have campaigned over a number of years as part of the f40 group to ensure that my schools in Gloucestershire get fair funding. I welcome the additional £475 million for capital spending, but that does not address the current spending problems. In Gloucestershire, we have overspent by £3.2 million on the high-needs block of the education budget. As I mentioned in my intervention on the Health Secretary, that is unfortunately because our children are getting more and more complex health and other problems at an earlier age and need more special assistance in schools.

While I welcome the additional £1.3 billion put into education as a result of our manifesto commitment, it was predicated on the basis that secondary school children throughout the country were to get £3,800 under the fair funding formula. In fact, we will only be able to afford per pupil secondary school funding of £3,600 in Gloucestershire. That additional £200 per pupil would make a huge difference to my schools. I have to report to the House the sad fact that while we had a period of years when our schools in Gloucestershire were going from good to outstanding ratings, that has begun to drop back, which is of great concern.

One way in which the Chancellor has responded to public concern over IT companies such as Google and Facebook is to introduce a digital services tax. I agree with a little bit of what Opposition Members said—I think the tax is unambitious. If we look at the Red Book, we see that the tax is only 2% on profits, with a £25 million annual allowance, and it only covers relevant global revenues in excess of £500 million. The result is that hundreds, and maybe thousands, of relevant small and medium-sized IT companies around the world will be exempt from it. The tax is only predicted to raise £440 million by 2023-24. If we raised more from that tax, we would be able to put more money into schools. The Chancellor needs to look at that carefully. He introduced the diverted profits tax to start to deal with the issue of international companies not paying proper tax in the UK, but that has only raised £388 million this year.

Infrastructure is very important in this country, and I welcome the £25.5 billion for the roads programme. I desperately hope that that extra money will finally secure the construction of the missing link on the A417 in my constituency, for which I have campaigned for 15 years. The Chief Secretary is listening, and I hope I will get good news shortly. We have consulted on it, and we have a preferred route. All we are waiting for is the Government to announce which route they want.
Affordable housing is very important, and I welcome the extra £500 million for the housing infrastructure fund. I welcome the fact that a lot more money is going into housing. Providing housing is one of the most important things that we can do for our young people, and intergenerational fairness needs to be looked at. Low-paid public sector workers in my constituency, and intergenerational fairness needs to be looked at. Providing housing is one of the most important things that we can do for our young people, and intergenerational fairness needs to be looked at.

2.56 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in the Budget debate. There were some announcements to be welcomed yesterday, such as the tax on big tech companies. I have been calling for those changes since my time on the Public Accounts Committee, and they are long overdue. In the round, though, this Budget fell well short of what is required. After the Prime Minister’s big talk of ending austerity, what we got was too little, too late. To get the changes we need to create jobs and prosperity in all parts of the UK, there is only one solution: a Labour Government.

Today, I want to focus on a key issue that has affected families in south Wales and on which the Government have failed to act, and that is helping people to protect their pensions. Last year I called attention to a brewing steel pensions crisis. Facing a hard deadline on their future options, British Steel pension scheme members found themselves targeted by unscrupulous pensions advisers. There were nearly 8,000 transfers out of the scheme, and we know that 872 of those were advised by firms that were eventually required to stop advising. Worryingly, one financial planner has said that the high number of compensation claims submitted against just one of those firms might be the tip of an iceberg.

Too many people saw their hard-earned pension pots put at risk, including constituents of mine who were worried sick about their future. They needed an immediate, robust and decisive response from the regulators. Unfortunately, poor co-ordination, unclear consumer information and weak oversight meant that the response for those consumers has been hesitant and insufficient. It was often unclear who they needed to approach for help. Unbelievably, they were expected to take up their concerns with the advisers they suspected of fleecing them. Pensioners researching specific advisers had to go through a lengthy process to find out basic information. They needed to search the Financial Conduct Authority’s register and ensure that consumer information is easy to find and to understand.

The most pressing problem remains the sorry state of financial regulation and pensions oversight. As a Work and Pensions Committee report found, while interest in steel pension transfers was increasing from late April 2017, it was not until November that the FCA began to take action. At that point, a full-scale crisis was under way. Even then, it was not until December that it was taking regular action against suspect firms. While there has been some progress, it has not been clear enough for us to give concrete answers to the people affected, or to give us confidence that this will not happen again.

Nowhere is this more evident than with one of the firms most closely identified with this scandal, Active Wealth (UK), and its director Mr Darren Reynolds. The Financial Services Compensation Scheme is paying out over £500,000 for claims related to this firm alone, yet 162 claims, many from steelworkers, are still open. Mr Reynolds failed to turn up to Parliament to answer questions. The ability of his company to advise on pension transfers was restricted and the company is now in liquidation. Despite this, Darren Reynolds is still listed as an active person on the FCA register. From my inquiries, he does not appear to have been referred for more serious investigation. What needs to be done for this sector to tackle this bad behaviour and for this character to be properly held to account?

The pensions debacle that hit steelworkers last winter should never have happened. It is a stark warning that regulating these businesses is not working well enough. It happened because we have a system of pensions and financial regulation that fails to protect hard-working people. After much criticism, the FCA and the Pensions Regulator say they are working better together, and that is a positive step. However, this is not a problem of co-ordination alone: we also need stricter penalties, better information and far tighter oversight. The Government urgently need to look at what has happened to drive improvements in the future. They need to review current regulation on pensions advice regularly, make sure that any wrongdoing is aggressively dealt with and ensure that consumer information is easy to find and to understand.

I want to include this personal plea for action. Many of my family were steelworkers or miners, and our steelworkers put in decades of toil to earn these pension pots. Some have found these pension pots put at risk because of the wrongdoing of some and the inaction of others. The Chancellor needs to put this right and to get on the side of working people.

I will end by focusing on the extreme pressure that the Government’s recent proposals on pension valuations could cause our police forces. Gwent police estimate these could cost them the same amount of money as 100 officers. The Government need to give our police more funding. Instead, however, they are forcing expensive accounting tricks on them with no notice. That is not right.

Finally, I point out that there is a better path. For a genuine end to austerity, real help for our public services, and rules and systems that work for working people and those in retirement, we need a Labour Government.

3.2 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I have been in the House long enough to remember lots of Labour Budgets, and I remember the claim that boom and bust had been abolished—only to be followed by the biggest bust that we have had in our history. It must have been a big bust, because only that would have made the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats work together. We normally fight like ferrets in a sack, but in the context of 2010, a real crisis had to be dealt with.

If we look at what has occurred over the long term, we can see that we have made a great success of it. First, we have reduced the deficit from 10% to about 1%. That is a good thing, because if we borrow lots of money, we
pay interest, which means that taxpayers’ money goes
to pay bondholders and shareholders, not on the things
that people want. I think that a compassionate Government
is one who balance the books, because that means they
can devote resources to the priorities that people have.

We have managed to do that without crashing the
economy. Despite the calls that were often made about
the economy going into recession, we have had eight
years of a growing economy, which is actually pretty
good. On top of that, we have created 3 million jobs. We
all know that the best way to deal with poverty, to give
people life chances and an opportunity to train, and the
best thing for families is employment. If there is a
challenge now it is to get wage levels and take-home pay
up. When we compare our performance on employment
with the EU and most of our neighbours, we can see
that we have done a pretty good job. I am pleased there
are signs that pay is picking up and that British workers
will be paid more.

There is a lot of good to be said about the Budget
yesterday. I do not think that Budgets in themselves
make much of a difference. What makes a difference is
long-term economic success and planning. If we look
at Germany and other countries, we can see that they have
have pretty sane policies year after year—over seven, 10 or
15 years—which grow the economy. Certainly since 2010, we have made pretty good progress, and
there is more progress to be made as we exit from the
European Union.

I welcome what the Chancellor has done on public
spending. We all know that there are pressures with an
ageing population and with mental health, and the
Government have started to address some of those
pressures. They have been able to do so because of
careful management of the public finances. I also welcome
the additional spending on defence. I am one of those
who have always felt we have cut defence too much,
perhaps because of the economic crisis. I think that
Britain, as a world power and as a member of the
United Nations Security Council, does need to spend
sufficient resources on defence, so the £2 billion announced
in the Budget is to be welcomed.

I think we have made good progress, and all that the
Government need to do now is to keep that progress up
year on year. We have a decent balance in this Budget
because not only have we been able to spend more on
public services—with the proviso that we need reform,
and the proviso that we need productivity to rise because
spending money will not necessarily in itself produce
better outcomes—but we have managed to reduce taxation.
Since 2010, we have doubled the allowance to £12,500
for those who pay tax, which is pretty good, and it
massively increases the incentive for people to get into
work. It is no accident that we have record employment,
because we have made raising the tax allowances to help
people get a job a very critical part of our employment
strategy. It is also quite right for the upper rate of tax to
go up as well, because that lifts all the tax bands for
many middle earners. The fact of the matter is that, as a
country, we tax people too much too early, and we need
increase incentives. There has to be a balance between
incentives and extra spending, and on this occasion we
have got that right.

We have a key task over the next few months in
getting a good deal on Brexit. I note that the shadow
Chancellor criticised the Government for contemplating
leaving without a deal, yet as far as I know the Labour
party are going to vote against the deal, so there seems
to be a slight double standard.

Sir Robert Syms: Well, we shall see what comes back
in the next few months.

The reality is that the Government have actually
managed the economy well, and because of that, despite
the level of uncertainty, we are still creating jobs and we
are still growing. The interesting point is that, despite
the soft patch earlier this year, the third quarter growth
figures show that we are now growing more than the
EU, so we are starting to pick up again.

I am confident that we have a good team at the
Treasury and that they are listening to what colleagues
are saying about their constituency concerns. I think we
have had a really decent Budget, which has balanced
sensible spending with reform and a sensible reduction
of taxation. We are also maintaining a sensible management
of the economy, certainly in the plans to have a 1% deficit,
which is a massive reduction. I hope that we over-perform,
and that if we do, we can reduce that further. The
reality is that this Government have done well, and the
country is doing well. We need not run down the country;
the country’s best years are still ahead of us.

3.8 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I thought I would
start by picking out a few key points from the Office for
Budget Responsibility report, which might have a slightly
different emphasis from the points that the Chancellor
would pick out. Let us start, on page 64, with household
disposable income:

“Real household disposable income fell by 0.2 per cent in
2017”.

On page 65, the report says:

“We expect relatively weak growth in per capita real earnings
and real disposable incomes… In 2019, real per capita disposable
income growth is flat”.

On household saving and debt, on page 67, it says:

“We expect unsecured debt to rise steadily as a share of
household disposable income”.

On household net lending and balance sheets, on page 70,
it says:

“the ratio of household debt to income has risen steadily since
the start of 2016… we expect the ratio of household debt to income
to continue to rise steadily… with the ratio reaching just under
150 per cent by the start of 2024.”

On business investment and stockbuilding, on page 72,
the report says:

“The latest data suggests business investment fell in both the
first two quarters of this year… we expect a modest rise in
business investment as a share of real GDP over the forecast
period—less than would be typical at this stage of an economic
cycle.”

On UK exports as a share of GDP, on page 77, it says:

“In August, the Government announced an ambition to increase
the UK’s exports to 35% of GDP, but has not specified the date
by which it believes that this can be achieved. The Government’s
previous aspiration was to increase exports to £1 trillion by
2020—the forecast suggests that this will be missed by £320 billion. The Government is not on course to meet its current ambition in our forecast”.

On risks and uncertainties, on page 81, the report says:

“The outlook for productivity growth remains hugely uncertain.”

On page 83, it says:

“the probability of a cyclical downturn occurring sometime over our forecast horizon is...high”.

On assumptions regarding the UK’s exit from the EU, it says:

“we still have no meaningful basis for predicting a precise outcome upon which we could then condition our forecast.”

On page 91, it says:

“Real GDP Growth has been revised down in 2018”.

Now, the Chancellor, of course, would and did choose to cherry-pick a different set of headlines yesterday, but I think this is a more balanced picture than that presented by him.

I can assure the Chancellor of two things in relation to this Budget. First, the people of Enfield are sick and tired of austerity. Secondly, we have no confidence that the Government’s programme of austerity is coming to an end. The Government’s £1 billion cut to the Metropolitan police budget since 2010 has resulted in 230 police officers and police community support officers being removed from the streets of Enfield. Over the same period, violent crime has surged locally by 85%. Where was the Chancellor’s announcement to reverse those cuts, put more bobbies on the beat and help create safer neighbourhoods?

How can the Government have the cheek to say austerity is over, when they are still planning cuts of £1.3 billion to councils next year? By 2020, the Government will have slashed funding to Enfield Council by 60% in just a decade.

There is a better example in this Budget of the Government’s misguided priorities. The Chancellor announced more funding for potholes than for our schools. Pothole funding is welcome, but surely education should be a higher priority. Does the future of our children not matter? This is a slap in the face for many schools in my constituency, which are having serious problems paying for basic items such as pens and paper, let alone retaining and recruiting teachers.

Austerity is not coming to an end, and nor, as the Chancellor asserted, is the “economy working for everyone”. This year, we have seen household debt rise to its highest level on record. Over-indebtedness in Enfield is higher than the London and national averages, and we have more than 14,000 residents in real financial difficulty. One in three workers living locally does not earn a living wage, and the average worker is £800 a year worse off than they were a decade ago.

The Government’s abject failure to address the housing crisis means local families are struggling to cope with soaring rents and a lack of affordable homes, with our borough having the highest eviction rate and the second highest level of homelessness acceptances in the capital.

The last Labour Government lifted 1 million children out of poverty, but child poverty rates under the Conservatives are getting worse, not better. Some 34,000 children in Enfield are now living below the poverty line. This is a shameful record for the Government, and a record that could deteriorate still further as a result of their disastrous universal credit roll-out.

Karin Smyth: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the failure to say anything considerable in the Budget about early years support and education and Sure Start centres yesterday represented a glaring omission, and addressing those issues would have helped families in constituencies such as Bristol South and Enfield North?

Joan Ryan: My friend is absolutely right. In fact, in Enfield, we now see a real problem, as we do in many other parts of the country, with children not being ready for school at the age of five. This has a significant impact on their achievement throughout their school careers and on their future.

North Enfield Foodbank has said that food bank usage continues to increase, with Enfield having the fourth highest rate of food bank usage in London last year. The main reason for that increase is delays in the payment of benefits and changes to them.

The Chancellor said that the Government were “delivering on the British people’s priorities, supporting our public services”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 668.]

There is no public service or institution more important in our country than the national health service. Huge pressure has been placed on doctors’ surgeries. Well over half the residents who replied to my GP survey said they had difficulty getting an appointment to see a doctor, and we know that, going forward, Enfield is short of 84 GPs to serve our growing population.

The Government’s chronic underfunding of our national health service since 2010 means that North Middlesex Hospital, like so many other hospitals across the country, is operating with a substantial financial deficit. NHS England is trying to deal with a deepening staff crisis, while hospitals are trying to recruit doctors and nurses. This is an impossible situation. We cannot square this circle. On public health, which warranted no mention whatever, we in Enfield are facing another £1 million cut by 2020, and everybody knows the link between poverty and health.

The Government have failed to address eight years of devastating cuts to our communities, and they are failing to deliver on the priorities of the British people. Austerity is not coming to an end. Yesterday’s Budget proves it. There is no hope here that I can take to the people of Enfield from this Conservative Government. I will not be supporting this Budget.

3.16 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):
It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). Since the Chancellor sat down yesterday, much has been made by commentators of the question of whether austerity has indeed ended. However, surely that is the wrong question, because what the Chancellor’s speech set out yesterday was the most important point of all: fiscal prudence and careful financial management are what a good Chancellor should always focus his attentions on before all other things, so that when there is a need for more cash for urgent or
improve the water basin; reduce the risk of flooding in
is real support to help those who commit to the slowest-
trees—funding to purchase carbon credits fr om landowners
beautiful part of our country .
assets; and, rather than fighting each other for personal
cultural community based on geograph y and our natural
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That is a scenario that Conservative Members—and, I believe, many on the Opposition Benches—cannot bear to consider for our constituents, who deserve so much better. The last eight years of fiscal rectitude have been hard, but we can now see the benefits of that graft, and the increasing tax take that the Chancellor can use to help to grow our economy and look after those in need. A stable economy means business investment, and that means real jobs, low interest rates and real investment in our public services.

The confirmation of £20 billion for our NHS is very welcome. I hope that the NHS five-year review will invest in local services and community hospitals, and address the rural sparsity factor, which has for too long been ignored by the centre.

There is the investment in the borderlands deal, a devolution programme that allows Northumberland and her neighbouring counties—regardless of the Scottish border, which is simply a line on a map as far as we in north Northumberland are concerned—to focus our investment on the areas of infrastructure and business sectors that we, as the locals, know will help to boost our economic growth most effectively. We will be able to work with our neighbours to achieve what those pesky border reivers never did: a coherent economic and cultural community based on geography and our natural assets; and, rather than fighting each other for personal gain, working together for us all in the most wild and beautiful part of our country.

The Chancellor’s commitment of £50 million for trees—funding to purchase carbon credits from landowners who plant qualifying woodland—is most welcome. This is real support to help those who commit to the slowest-growing crops: the trees that maintain good soil health; improve the water basin; reduce the risk of flooding in the valleys; and hold carbon dioxide while they are growing and then continue to be a carbon sink when they are harvested, with the wood used in housing and the wood trade.

It is excellent news that the Chancellor will be directing all road tax receipts into road investment and maintenance. That makes perfect sense and is welcomed by those who pay their taxes to use the roads every day. I had thought I might not be able to find a way to thank the Chancellor for his support, when he was Secretary of State for Transport, of my campaigning efforts to invest in the A1 through Northumberland in order to dual it and to make it into the safe and functional 21st century road it needs to be for local users, visiting tourists and businesses moving goods. He understands the investment concept of “build it and they will come”. The first £300 million, which he committed, is now being spent to dual the first 13 miles. With the commitment to allocate £28 billion to the national roads fund, he can be assured that I shall be returning to discuss the dualling of the last stretch of the English undualled road between London and Edinburgh shortly. Before that, however, the commitment to general road maintenance and the battle against potholes is most welcome. Northumberland County Council looks after over 3,500 km of roads. The “beast from the east” managed to shred many of our roads earlier this year, so this commitment to spending the monies collected from road users makes real sense to us.

I am also most grateful that the Chancellor has heard the call from my most rural communities for investment to ensure that we can get decent broadband to every property and business, wherever it is. This will ensure that we have long-term solutions that use technology to reach everyone.

Most welcome, of course, are the cuts to income tax, which will mean that my constituents will each have a personal allowance of £12,500 from next April, as well as an increased national living wage of £8.21. Could somebody tell my son, because that will really excite him, given that he will have earned even more when he gets down to the pub at the weekend? There is much for our small businesses to benefit from. The Chancellor has made a commitment to Brexit and to giving all Departments the cash that they need to get ready for the changes that will need to be put in place.

I thank the Chancellor for listening to the voices of so many MPs about one of those areas of Government spending that most people take for granted and assume is all working fine. I believe that we need to talk about this area of critical national policy much more than we do. It is a public service like no other, because this public sector workforce puts its life on the line for us every day. The question of defence investment and why a comprehensive insurance cover is necessary is not a subject of conversation every day among mums at the school gate. However, every parent’s focus is on keeping their children safe, well fed, healthy, and able to have a happy and safe childhood, so how is it that the most important role for any Government to fulfil—protecting their population—is too often forgotten or ignored in polling and questions of day-to-day spending? It is our insurance policy, but we assume that everything is all okay. I therefore listened with pleasure to the Chancellor committing nearly £2 billion over the next 18 months to help the Ministry of Defence to ensure it can maintain all our capabilities to keep us safe.
As we leave the EU, the one thing which remains fixed is our geography. We will remain, as we have always been, an island maritime trading nation—facing and trading across the globe. We need to keep safe the seas across which all our trade moves. We need to ensure that international waters are free of danger so that oil and other goods can move around the globe, whether they are British products being exported, or our imports into our thriving ports of the food in our supermarkets and the oil we need every day. Without the Royal Navy’s day-to-day invisible work, our economy would be profoundly affected. I am very pleased to support this Budget.

3.24 pm

Brendan O’Hara: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the commission’s report and advise him to read it, rather than simply taking the crib sheet handed out by his party.

Much has been made of the Chancellor’s announcement that £20 billion of new funding would be made available to the NHS over the next five years. We are told that that funding will be transformational for the national health service, but let us put it into perspective. The new money, which we welcome, averages out at a 3.4% increase per annum for the next five years. That is actually still less than the average funding increases received by the NHS in the first 60 years of its existence. All the Chancellor announced is that NHS funding, having been squeezed mercilessly by the Tories in the past decade, is returning to a position that is a little below its historical average. The reality is that in releasing this money, the Chancellor has simply removed the Treasury’s heavy boot from the neck of the national health service. If the Chancellor had had the good manners to remain in the Chamber until my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) had spoken yesterday, he would have heard him ask why the Scottish national health service is being short-changed in the Budget to the tune of £50 million a year, which makes a cumulative shortfall of £250 million over the five-year period. That £50 million is enough money to pay for 1,200 nurses in Scotland.

In his Budget, the Chancellor had the perfect opportunity to do the right thing: stop the roll-out of universal credit dead in its tracks until the well-publicised faults in the system, which are hurting the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, have been fixed properly, once and for all.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Further to that point, is it not a scandal that the Highland Council has to fork out £2.5 million of its carefully hained resources to pay for the roll-out of universal credit? What might that £2.5 million have done for some of the poorest people in areas such as Argyllshire and my constituency?

Brendan O’Hara: I could not agree more. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the cost to councils and individuals of the appalling roll-out of universal credit. The Government know that it is wrong, but they are pigheadedly determined to see it roll out. The Budget was the Chancellor’s perfect opportunity to stop it, but he refused. For reasons best known to himself, he decided instead to tinker around at the edges, with the promised money coming nowhere close to meeting the shortfall that was created by his predecessor. The Chancellor has decided to do almost nothing for those who are currently on universal credit and are struggling under the work allowance, the two-child cap and the benefit freeze.

As Gillian McInnes, the manager of the citizens advice bureau in my Argyll and Bute constituency, said: “The Government has still not done enough to address the real problems of universal credit, which are causing serious hardship for many families. Without further support for families, many parents and children will be left in a desperate situation, with many”—indeed, many more—“forced into using food banks.”

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The growth commission that was commissioned by the Scottish Government said that there would be 25 years of austerity if Scotland separated. How would Scotland balance the books then?
This was the Chancellor’s opportunity to end austerity—he chose not to. This was his opportunity to stop and fix universal credit—he chose not to. Instead, he and the UK Government chose to hand out tax cuts to the wealthy while continuing to try to balance the country’s books on the backs of the poorest in our society. Heaven help us all if this was the Chancellor’s “good guy Budget”—the one that was based on the Government securing a half-decent Brexit deal. One shudders to think what he has up his sleeve when we are all forced to reconvene in this place early next year for his fiscal event, if and when the Brexit negotiations go totally pear-shaped.

3.31 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): There is much to celebrate in the Chancellor’s autumn Budget, which carefully balances the need to spend more on key services with the need not to snuff out progress in repairing our economy. Having listened carefully to the criticisms from Opposition Members this afternoon, I am left only with the sneaking suspicion that if we had announced £100 billion of extra spending, Labour Members would probably have advocated £200 billion, using our constituents’ money to hase their party in crowing virtue.

The first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens secure. In a world of rapidly changing threats from both state and non-state actors, the substantial additional money for the armed forces and the £160 million extra for counter-terrorism policing operations are timely and welcome. If we fail to retain skilled personnel or to keep up with technological changes in warfare, and if we look only at the immediate challenges while our enemies plan for the next half-century, we risk reneging on our principal commitment to the electorate.

Our vital reforms to welfare have been broadly welcomed by the public, who understand the inherent justice of making work pay. However, if those reforms are to maintain public confidence, it is vital that they are funded correctly. Universal credit is only just beginning to roll out in my constituency, and I know that my local jobcentre has been eager to use the new tools available to them with universal credit. The £1,000 increase in UC work allowances, the boost to the minimum wage, the increase in the personal tax allowance, and money to ease the transition to universal credit will make crucial differences to the credibility, and therefore the sustainability, of our welfare policy.

My main high streets in Upminster, Elm Park, Harold Hill and Hornchurch are sustained by lively independent retailers who work exceptionally hard and take risks to provide jobs and services to the local community. The cut in business rates by a third for retailers with a rateable value under £51,000 is vital to their sustainability. Coupled with cash for high street regeneration, money to repair potholes and the removal of rates for public toilets, I hope that we shall begin to see a revival of small town centres.

We all know that the NHS faces massive additional cost pressures from an ageing population and expensive new medical advances. The Government have set out an unprecedented multi-year funding plan that equates to over £20 billion more a year in real terms by 2023-24. I hope that will put the finances of our major hospitals on a sustainable footing. The demographic pressures on the outer London of growing numbers of children alongside a rapidly ageing population, the PFI debt burden and difficulties recruiting staff place constant pressure on the budget of my local hospital, Queen’s. Beyond that, any additional funds must be relentlessly focused on investments that ultimately bring down the cost of the NHS. In that regard, I put in a plea for a nurse training facility in outer east London to reduce reliance on agency staff, measures to boost primary care to keep people out of hospital and, as a special request from a young constituent, the full implementation of the Think Autism strategy. I also want to raise the concerns of my local hospice, Saint Francis, which is worried that the NHS pay award will make it harder for hospices to get the right staff. I ask that their needs be considered, given the exceptional support they provide to the terminally ill and their families.

None the less, I must sound a note of concern. The NHS is now consuming an ever larger slice of the national pie—it is projected to account for 38% of public service spending by 2023—and this will have consequences. Even if we removed the extra money for NHS England, however, the Budget suggests that spending pressures on our local police and councils would likely continue. We have been giving councils more power to raise revenue, and yesterday we announced £650 million to ease short-term social care pressures. That is right. The core schools budget is to rise, too, and primary and secondary schools will get some additional capital spending, but I fear that these measures will prove insufficient to keep at bay the rising costs and demand pressures in my outer-London constituency, particularly on special educational needs provision, additional employer pension contributions and increased use of statutory services that squeeze money needed for other critical elements of council work.

The NHS boost must be openly debated before the spending review and set against other public spending priorities. Health is vital to my constituents, but if they were asked whether the NHS should be the almost exclusive beneficiary of additional public funds, or whether a portion should be given to our overstretched police forces, schools and councils, I am not convinced that the health service would secure all the bounty. People in my constituency are worried about crime and frustrated at the Mayor of London’s leadership of the Metropolitan police, which is seeing outer-London boroughs deprioritised against inner-London ones. Beyond the precept, we need to be confident that the Home Office is providing the funding that police officers need to meet their increasingly complex workload.

Finally, I would like to issue a word of caution about Brexit. It has been suggested in the approach to the Budget that any failure by MPs to back the Government’s eventual Brexit deal will jeopardise our ability to turn on the spending taps in the spring. Parliamentarians on both sides of the divide have expressed concerns about the Chequers strategy, as has the EU itself, and I am anxious that we avoid a deal cemented with unacceptable concessions or a proposal that slithers us into an indefinite period of limbo. Either scenario would heighten the risk of no deal and the prospect of a financial Labour Government, which would unravel the implications for the public finances. The cost of Labour’s renationalisation programme alone is £176 billion.
I have heard it said that most of the electorate care little about customs unions, trade deals or regulations, and that they just want an agreement of any shape and then to move on. I caution MPs against making that assumption. One resident wrote to me last week:

“Speaking to people locally, I feel I am not alone in worrying that what we will end up with is just what we have now without any influence.”

The best way to protect our public finances from a Labour Government, unleash our economy from uncertainty and bring about the growth that can pay for better services is to negotiate a deal with the EU that is not only deliverable but gives our nation the flexibility and autonomy it needs to make the most of Brexit.

I should have liked to say much more about investment, growth and trade policy, all of which ultimately underpin the provision of strong public services, but I will conclude by suggesting that what matters above all to our constituents is not the amount spent on each service but the outcomes from and quality of those services. We must not forget value for money, the risk of false economies and the inadvertent pressure placed on other Departments amid the laudable desire to put the health service on a firmer footing.

3.37 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I note the Prime Minister’s recent announcement that austerity is over, although the message does not seem to have reached the Chancellor. There was nothing in yesterday’s Budget to end austerity and there is no doubt that austerity is alive and kicking viciously in my constituency. As with so many things, the Prime Minister seems to think that just by saying something she can make it happen. Her first announcement as Prime Minister was that she was going to help those just about managing. Well, the just about managing are still waiting, and the just about managing in Burnley are managing just a bit less well than they were two years ago.

When we confront the Conservative party with the dire consequences that its budget cuts have wrought on our constituents—from the rise in NHS waiting lists to the lack of care available to the elderly and disabled and headteachers struggling to manage underfunded schools—we are told that record amounts are being spent. It does not take an economist to see that the Chancellor cannot, on the one hand, take credit for reducing the deficit and, on the other, brag about increased spending, without having a better record on growth than this Government’s miserable effort.

Yesterday’s Budget failed to address the crisis in the NHS and social care—one mention of carers, but not a single penny of support; not even a mention of the WASPI women or women’s refuges; no attempt to right the wrongs of universal credit; no extra funding for the police and fire services; no attempt to provide additional funding for nursery schools, in spite of the Education Secretary’s recent warm words. The extra spending on repairing potholes is welcome, but I find it shocking that the Chancellor provided more for potholes than he did for schools, even though every school in Burnley and Padiham is facing damaging cuts.

The Government like to mislead with figures. There is a pattern of swinging cuts, followed by the reinstatement of modest amounts amid a fanfare of celebration. However, the recent revelation from the Office for National Statistics about the Department for Education’s dubious figures really was something else. Most ridiculously, spending on private schools was counted as Government spending on education. Next, I would not be surprised to see the use of luxury spas included in public health spending.

For me, the most damning statistic to emerge over the summer was the one on life expectancy, which has fallen in parts of my constituency for the first time in over 30 years. That is a true reflection of the Government’s record in office and the price my constituents are paying for austerity. Members will not be surprised to learn that the last time there was a fall in life expectancy was the 1980s, during the tenure of another Tory Government committed to policies that resulted in the decimation of our public services. Members may recall that we were told at the time, “There is no alternative.” Well, there is an alternative: it is a Labour Government.

The Government consistently remind us of the need to be fair to taxpayers. Let us consider that with regard to taxpayers in my constituency. Consider the low-paid essential worker who earns £12,500 per annum. Every extra pound they earn is taxed at a marginal rate of 32%. Compare that with the tax paid by the multimillionaire who, barely lifting a finger, reaps the benefits of stock market wheeling and dealing, and pays capital gains tax at a mere 20%. There is nothing fair about that.

Let us consider fairness for council tax payers. The owner of a band A property in my constituency, worth as little as £50,000, has to pay a council tax bill of £1,220, while the owner of a band G property in Westminster worth £2 million gets a council tax bill £36 lower. There is nothing fair about that.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that eight years of austerity have failed completely and that only a Labour Government will provide the investment our country desperately needs?

Julie Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a good point; I agree with him absolutely.

Some 36% of the children in my constituency are growing up in poverty, and the changes to universal credit will make that much worse. Can it be fair to punish children whose only crime is to have two siblings? Five and a half thousand children growing up in Burnley and Padiham will be affected by those draconian measures. There is nothing fair about that either.

The people in my constituency know who is responsible for the growing queue at the food bank; they know who to blame when they cannot get a GP appointment; they know who to hold to account when the old and disabled are left to struggle on without adequate social care; and, perhaps most importantly, they will not forget that it was this Conservative Government who, most shamefully of all, forced record numbers of our children to grow up in poverty, short of food, warmth and hope. They will not forget.

3.43 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), but I disagree with her. This is a great Budget.

I am glad that the Chancellor has set aside substantial amounts to prepare for all eventualities as we approach Brexit. The Banbury constituency’s vote in the referendum was the closest in the country; by 500 people, we voted
to leave. Now, I hear a great deal of unity locally over the need to get on with getting a deal. The uncertainty of Brexit is challenging for my constituents. With a good deal done, I really look forward to a pro-growth spending review early next year.

Locally, we can see that the economy is going well. There are great employment figures, but we need to focus on wage growth, which leads to more disposable income. I, for one, was pleased to hear the figures the Chancellor gave yesterday.

In my area, we are obsessed by healthcare. Everybody in this Chamber will have heard me talk, probably several times, about the Horton General Hospital, which we have been fighting to save for the past 40 years. The problem over the years has in fact been not financial, but structural. Small is beautiful and local, and we must not give in to the overweening ambition of Oxford to suck in more cases or more births. The German model of maternity offers choice but retains smaller obstetric units and, most importantly, excellent outcomes for mothers and babies. We have had a historical failure to recruit both midwives and obstetricians. Locally, we have had real progress with the clinical commissioning group since the fabulous new interim chief executive took over. The Horton has a very bright future.

I welcome the extra funding in the Budget— an average in real growth terms of 3.4% a year—but we need to ensure that it translates into extra people doing the right thing in the right place. Nobody is pretending that every sort of complicated surgery can be done everywhere, but A&E, paediatrics and simply having a baby with the benefit of an epidural should be provided locally. I know that the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care agrees with this broad premise and I look forward to talking about my local situation with him.

In north Oxfordshire, we are proud of building three new houses a day. We are keen to welcome people to Banbury to fill our jobs and we are building them houses to live in. I am often asked how we are managing to make this progress: we have done so by having a consistent and strong local message and strong leadership. Cherwell District Council’s policy of putting housing generally on brownfield sites near towns, rather than piecemeal in villages, has seen new communities flourish. I also welcome the housing measures we heard about yesterday.

It would be wrong of me not to mention the public service I have worked in throughout my adult life. The Justice Committee, on which I am very proud to sit, recently heard that spending on justice will have fallen by 40% between 2010-11 and 2019-20. The Department does not have a protected budget. I was very pleased to hear what the Chancellor had to say yesterday, and I welcome the £30 million to be invested in the wider justice system. I feel very strongly that justice is not free; it does not just happen. The rule of law is not automatic, as we can see from the world we live in: it is a world in which people are poisoned in Salisbury, and in which the Chinese have a definition of the rule of law that does not coincide with the norms of modern international law since the second world war. I feel very strongly that we need to stand up for British justice values, and this does not happen automatically or cheaply.

We have had real difficulties in the prison service.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Prentis: No, I will not; I am sorry, but I need to make progress, and I feel very strongly about this subject. We have had real difficulties in the prison service under successive Governments which we know can only be resolved if we can recruit more staff. The prisons Minister and the Lord Chancellor, whom I am happy to see in his place, are both working extremely hard on staff recruitment, and real progress has been made. We can see that this is making a day-to-day difference on the coalface, if you like, in prisons. People are being treated more appropriately.

However, there are other areas of justice spend that are harder to justify and even to talk about in this place. We have a crisis of judicial recruitment, for example, and it is tied up with the provision of suitable judicial pensions. The quality of court buildings also matters for morale, and it is therefore important for the recruitment of the people that we need to provide justice in a way that we all too often take for granted. The justice system stands or falls as one. What we do for the most lowly magistrates court is just as important as what we do for the Supreme Court. The system must be joined up, and if we are proud of the rule of law and the separation of powers that we talk about so often, we must be careful to fund the system as an entirety.

I am glad that the Lord Chancellor has been here to listen to this. I commend him for what he is doing. I also commend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what he is doing for the justice system. The subject does not often get talked about in the House, and it was not talked about a great deal yesterday, but the detail in the Red Book has pleased me. Thank you for your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.
It has to provide enough time for the person in debt to get advice on the best way to resolve their problem debts, to recover from temporary financial difficulties and enter a statutory debt solution, and to pay their debts at a manageable rate. There must also be funding so people can access free, independent and impartial services speedily, because when people decide they are at the end of their tether, they want to see someone quickly.

The Government suggest a breathing space of 60 days, but debt advisers need the flexibility to recommend an extension. I worry that if the arrangement is too rigid, creditors may well delay until someone gets out of the breathing space period so they can start chasing them again. Call me cynical, but that is what 23 years at Citizens Advice does.

There is clear consensus that a breathing space solution must cover all debts, including debts to the Government—household bills such as council tax and moneys owed to central Government. It must also offer protection against further interest and charges, and against enforcement action. Creditors must stop collection activities such as calls, letters and visits—that means no more bailiffs.

Returning briefly to universal credit, there must be no deductions from benefits or other income to recover outstanding debts during the breathing space period; future deductions must be affordable, and—please—there must be no public register of people who enter a breathing space. Evidence from Scotland shows that that deters people from doing so. If there is going to be such a register, let us make it private between creditors and people in debt.

I welcome the announcement that the Government will look at no-interest loans, although the long timescale will allow many people to fall into debt. It is unfortunate that, despite the work of the Law Commission, Government time was not given to debate ending the exploitation of a Victorian law that was used as a vehicle for logbook loans.

I turn to education—in particular sixth-form funding, which is at crisis level.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yvonne Fovargue: I have to move on, I am afraid.

There is a range of new requirements, the needs of schools and colleges have increased, and under-investment in sixth-form education is having a negative impact on the education of the young people in my constituency. That simply means the Government will be unable to meet their stated objective of having a strong post-Brexit economy and a socially mobile, highly educated workforce. That is bizarre, frankly.

At least £760 per student is required to continue providing 16 to 18-year-olds with a high-quality education, but the Raise the Rate campaign asked the Chancellor to increase national funding by a more modest £200 per student. That would at least have been a start. It is disappointing that there has been no action.

Will the £400 million to provide the “little extras” be shared with sixth-form colleges? That might have helped Winstanley College in my constituency with the little extra of providing a teacher so German A-level could be reinstated, or allowed St John Rigby College to reinstate one-to-one time to support students who are struggling emotionally or academically—it might have, had that money not been ring-fenced for building maintenance and purchasing equipment.
Let me comment briefly on the raising of personal allowances. Families on the average wage in Makerfield will gain just over £12 a month, while people on more than £50,000 per year will gain just under £40 a month. It is pretty obvious who will gain the most. It certainly is not women over 50, who are still waiting for any measure to help them.

The Chancellor said he chose not to unveil the Budget tomorrow as he wanted to avoid Halloween jokes. It is a good job he did not wait until next Monday, as my constituents, having heard that austerity is over, may have expected a firecracker of a Budget that lit up their lives. Instead, all they got was a damp squib.

It is pretty obvious who will gain the most. It certainly is not anyone on less than £50,000 per year who will gain just under £40 a month. It is a measure to help them.

Families on the average wage in Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) have mentioned the challenges we face and the future opportunities. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and I have produced a book on the future of work, looking at countries around the world that are meeting these challenges, including South Korea, Singapore and Argentina. Lots of people across the country are trying to meet these challenges, but they also exist globally.

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who was right about funding for 16 to 18-year-olds. The years from 16 to 18 are a critical time, and funding dropping off at that stage poses some severe challenges to colleges and schools.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Like me, the hon. Gentleman is a west midlands MP, and knows that the west midlands economy is very important to the country. I am not sure whether the Government have clarified whether there will be more money for further education. Further education is the backbone of things such as apprenticeships, and we need more apprenticeships. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should be focusing on this important area?

Jeremy Lefroy: Indeed, and I think I just mentioned that. In my constituency, Newcastle-under-Lyme College and Stafford College do excellent work, as does South Staffordshire College, but they are underfunded, particularly at that level.

A further challenge is balancing the Budget. The OBR report refers to the Chancellor in terms of St Augustine, as it describes the Budget as Augustinian—“make me chaste, but not yet.” I believe that it is nearly 20 years since the UK has run a Budget surplus, and we are now pushing that back by a further two years. This is not the way to go. We have to look carefully at how we can return to a balanced Budget or a surplus, which can only come from growth, more efficiency or allowing tax rates to rise—we have some of the lowest revenues as a percentage of GDP in the G7—but that has not happened this time. If we are to maintain a sound fiscal policy, it will have to happen soon. The country needs to build up assets in better times to meet the challenges of hard times, and one of those assets is a surplus Budget and a reducing deficit.

Local government finance has been mentioned today. This is a great challenge because I believe, as do pretty much all colleagues in this House, in the importance of devolution and making decisions locally. However, the Government are placing more and more pressures on local government, without giving it the means to deal with them. Local authorities, including Staffordshire, have done excellent work to reduce spending while maintaining services over the last eight years. That cannot go on. Local government has reached the bottom. I welcome the additional money, but we need to see more, particularly in terms of loosening up the requirements for referendums.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) rightly said that the Office for Budget Responsibility report talked about the low savings rate and rising personal debt. That incredibly important area has not been focused on, and I am extremely concerned about it. We need to help households rebuild their balance sheets. People cannot always look to Government to support them in times of difficulty. Personal assets are vital, and I urge the Chancellor to look at ways of...
encouraging saving, difficult though that is—including efficient lifetime savings accounts that people can draw on in times of difficulty, financial education in schools and further support for credit unions.

We have the biggest current account deficit in the G7—from memory, it is about 3.8%. That is down from 5.1%, but it is still too much. We are too dependent on resources from other countries, and we need to build up our network of foreign assets, from which we receive income. At the same time, we need to reduce our balance of trade deficit.

Finally, we have the challenge of supporting people on the lowest incomes who are long-term sick or disabled. At a time when many people in this country are seeing their incomes continue to rise and are living in prosperity, which I welcome, we need to meet the needs of those who suffer from disability, sickness or low income. I welcome the changes to universal credit, but it still does not work for everyone. I welcome the additional money, but we have to make sure that nobody loses out in the transfer to universal credit, most particularly disabled people. Others, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) yesterday, have spoken about how that could be done.

This Budget is a chance to tackle long-term challenges in difficult circumstances, with the coming exit from the EU. The Chancellor has seized the chance to address some of those areas, on which I congratulate him. I believe that, but for this challenge of exiting the EU, he would have tackled other areas, too, but the challenges that remain cannot be put off for ever.

4.7 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, especially with respect to renewable energy.

This might not be a Halloween Budget, but it is yet another attempt to scare Members about Brexit and to frame the Brexit question as deal or no deal. Although the Chancellor hardly mentioned Brexit, the underlying message is that there is something for us if we back this Budget—tax cuts and something for the NHS—and more in store if we get a soft Brexit. The other message is that if we do not vote for a deal, there will be a disastrous hard Brexit.

Certainly a hard Brexit would be a disaster, but so would this soft Brexit. It is just wrong of the Government, day after day, to propose a choice between the Brexit deal that the Government come back with and a hard Brexit with no deal. The truth is that there are alternatives. When we get there, this House must debate those alternatives, not just the two that the Government keep scaring us about. It is almost like the Noel Edmonds TV game show, “Deal or No Deal”. I switched over to another channel when it came on my TV, and this Parliament could switch over and have a third choice—that choice should be a people’s vote and an exit from Brexit.

The Budget forecasts show why a third option is so important. People should look at the growth forecasts, which are seriously scary. We are going to be trapped in a Brexit low-growth economy. We have had 10 years of financial crisis austerity and, with these growth figures, we are going to have 10 years of Brexit austerity. The figures should be really scary. Our economy had near to the highest growth rate of any G7 country in the four years before the referendum, and since then we have had the lowest growth in the G7. That should worry us, and that is even before we add in the risks and uncertainties. The OBR’s economic forecast could not factor in all the risks and uncertainties; it had to assume that there would be a soft Brexit.

So even these low growth figures may well not be as bad as things turn out to be. That feeds in to the spending figures. Ministers have made much of the health figures, but when one strips out the health increase, one sees that all the rest of the Departments will, on average, see 0% growth for the next few years. That is austerity continuing—it is really scary and completely not needed. According to the OBR, Brexit has already cost £15 billion in lost tax revenue, and we hear in the Budget that even Brexit preparation is going to cost more. That is why we have to escape this Brexit trap; whether it is a no-growth Brexit or a deal Brexit, we have to have a people’s vote.

This Brexit Budget was shaped to try to buy off the Back Benchers and the Democratic Unionist party, not to try to get a proper forward strategy for this country. There were deals in there for Belfast. It may deserve that money, but the timing for it is funny, and we know what the talks have been to try to get there. We know that the Government could not put forward the tax rise needed to get the Budget into surplus and to invest in public services because they could not get that tax rise through their Back Benchers. The Brexitite Tories on the Back Benches would not have voted for a tax rise. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) was right: we need to get a surplus, we need to invest in our schools, hospitals and police, and we need to undo some of the damage from universal credit. We need that, but we can only do it if we have some honesty on the public finances. The reality is that this Chancellor and this Government are so weak that they cannot put through the tax measures needed to get the right economic balance in this country and the right investment in our public services.

When we look at individual public services, we see that they are crying out for investment. For example, since 2015 we have lost 4,789 full-time police officers, 2,231 community support officers and 4,334 special officers. That is more than 9,400 officers lost, at a time when crime has been going up. Knife crime has increased by 62% since 2015, firearm crime has increased by 30% and homicides have increased by 33%. The Conservatives should be ashamed of themselves for not having been prepared to invest in the security of our people and safety on the streets when violent crime is going up by so much.

I have a question for those on the Treasury Bench. We have been looking in the Red Book. The Government have announced £164 million for counter-terrorism police, which is welcome, but it does not score anywhere in the Red Book. We have been making inquiries and asking the Treasury about this, and it says that it is from the reserves. I have never heard an explanation like that. The Chancellor announces £160 million for counter-terrorism policing yet it is not in the Red Book or said to be in the Red Book. That is an insult to this House, and I hope that Ministers will have an answer by the end of the day.

My constituency is seeing school funding cut, and headteachers have been marching. They do not normally do that in the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames,
but they were doing so recently because they are fed up with having to lose staff, cut the curriculum and cut opportunities for young people in their charge. They do not stand for it, and this House should not stand for it. It was an insult to offer less money to schools than the Government are spending on potholes. What sort of priorities do this Government have when they put potholes before our children and their futures?

Not only did the Government get the short-term spending decisions wrong but they got the long-term spending decisions and strategy wrong. Where was the investment to tackle climate change? What about the opportunity in green growth—in our renewable energy? There are huge opportunities there, but there was nothing on that in the Budget. As for social justice, it was good to see some recognition that universal credit is causing pain out there, but the Budget did not go anywhere near enough. We are going to have to revisit this as a House if we are going to make sure that the poorest people in our country share in any future prosperity.

4.14 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): There is much to digest in the Budget, so I shall focus on only a few of the announcements that were made. In line with the theme of today’s debate, I shall start with those on health.

As a children’s doctor, I work on the frontline of the NHS. Throughout my career, I have become increasingly concerned about the number of young people with mental health problems. More than half of those problems start before the child is 14, and 75% have started by the time the child is 18, so early intervention is critical to try to avoid crises further down the line. I therefore welcome the Government’s announcement of £2 billion more for mental health, which will ensure that every school has a dedicated mental health team to tackle what is becoming an epidemic of eating disorders, depression and self-harm among young people. It is a welcome step as part of the Government’s commitment to develop parity of esteem for mental and physical health problems. More work needs to be done to identify the cause of these problems so that they can be tackled earlier.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care thinks about how to spend the Government’s £20 billion increase for the NHS, will he consider how much money is given to children with life-threatening and life-limiting disorders? Many of their families struggle from day to day, so extra money to help to fund children’s hospices, as well as the availability of respite care, would be most welcome.

I have spoken in the Chamber previously about the challenges facing ambulance services in rural areas. My beautiful constituency of Sleaford and North Hykeham covers some 433 square miles. Ambulances have to rattles along lots of little tiny winding roads, at speed, to get to patients. Increasing the number of ambulances available to East Midlands ambulance service would help.

Ambulances do not just travel by land. Air ambulances provide an incredible service to our most unwell patients. They are funded entirely by philanthropy, and such services are under constant pressure to fundraise so that they can buy and maintain aircraft and pay for staff. I welcome the Government’s announcement of £10 million of capital funding for air ambulance trusts, which will contribute towards these life-saving services.

For ambulances on the ground, the challenge is not just distance but the road network along which they travel. The additional £28 billion investment in roads will represent the biggest single upgrade of the network since the expansion of the first motorways in the ’60s and ’70s. I will continue to campaign for extra money to complete the Lincoln bypass, and to improve the A46/A17/A1 junction and areas of the A1 and A15, so that roads in Lincolnshire are safer and we can travel more smoothly.

The money for potholes has been mentioned by other right hon. and hon. Members. Potholes are a big problem in Lincolnshire, so I am pleased that extra money will be spent on them, particularly as winter is coming.

I am glad that the Government are investing in our physical infrastructure, but in the 21st century, digital infrastructure is also extremely important. We rely on the internet more and more in our daily lives, so the lack of high-speed broadband in some rural areas can create a real sense of isolation. Whether for the person who cannot download their papers, the small-business owner who cannot submit their taxes online or the studious schoolgirl who cannot complete her homework on the online maths platform, a poor internet connection affects all aspects of work, family life and opportunity for rural constituents. I am therefore delighted that the Government are providing an extra £250 million for high-speed broadband in rural areas. It will be a welcome boost, if it is ensured that the money is directed towards connecting the remaining 5% to 8% who are not yet connected rather than towards getting faster speeds for those who already have a reasonable connection.

A Government’s first responsibility is always the protection of their citizens. As we mark the centenary of the end of the first world war, we remember the sacrifices that were made by many, and also remember the sacrifices made every day by our brave servicemen and women. I participated in the Royal Air Force branch of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, through which I met many service people at all levels. I heard about their concerns and worries, and about the pressures they were facing. They do an incredible job in the most challenging and, often, the most terrifying of circumstances. It is vital that we provide them with the support that they need, and the Chancellor’s announcement of an extra £1 billion for our armed forces will help to ensure that our armed forces can continue to operate at the very highest level.

Finally, I welcome the Government’s commitment to making work pay. Increasing the work allowance and decreasing the taper rate further for universal credit will help even more people into work. Some 1,000 more jobs are created in the UK every day, and we also have one of the lowest unemployment levels in Europe, which affects young people in particular. Young people in this country have a much better chance of getting a job than those in other parts of Europe, which is something of which we should be proud.

Furthermore, increasing the personal allowance to £12,500, which fulfils our manifesto promise a full year early, allows people who have gone out to work to keep more of what they earn to spend as they wish. The best
stability that someone can have is a monthly pay packet, and this Government’s effort will ensure that a record number of people have that stability.

4.19 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this most important debate on public services and the Budget. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). I agreed with her comments about children’s mental health. As co-chair of the all-party group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, I agree that tackling the causes of children’s mental health problems is vital.

Today, however, I wish to talk about community safety and the public service that our police provide. My constituency of Stockton South desperately wanted a better response from the Chancellor than a Budget that ignored community policing. I cannot really imagine how it must feel to be frightened in my own home. I have heard many people’s stories of the fear that they feel, but how many Members really know what it is like? How many of us know what it is like to be woken in the night by people loudly knocking on the door looking for someone to sell them drugs; what is it like to know that, if we were to go out to walk the dog, someone might break in and steal our possessions; and what is it like to have to listen to sex workers being threatened by clients through a flimsy adjoining wall when we are lying in our beds in the early hours of the morning?

Hon. Members have probably heard these sorts of stories from looking in their email inboxes, engaging on social media and meeting people at their surgeries, but yesterday those affected were ignored by the Chancellor. Cleveland police, which covers my constituency, has dedicated professionals working hard under the exceptional leadership of Police and Crime Commissioner Barry Coppinger, a new chief constable, and a team of hardworking officers, police community support officers and support staff. I pay tribute to everyone working in our police forces to keep our communities safe. They are the people who pick up the pieces during a crisis. Thank them for everything that they do. No police officer goes to work each day not wanting to help, not wanting to prevent crime, not wanting to respond to need and not wanting to engage with communities, but our community can see that the policing in Cleveland is not adequately meeting their needs. In the past eight years, time and again, the Conservatives have heard many people’s stories of the fear that they feel, but how many Members really know what it is like? How many of us know what it is like to be woken in the night by people loudly knocking on the door looking for someone to sell them drugs; what is it like to know that, if we were to go out to walk the dog, someone might break in and steal our possessions; and what is it like to have to listen to sex workers being threatened by clients through a flimsy adjoining wall when we are lying in our beds in the early hours of the morning?

Since 2010, Cleveland police has lost about 500 officers, yet next year the Government plan to make Cleveland’s thin blue line even thinner, with a further cut of an even greater £9 million. Nine million pounds of cuts means even fewer police officers at a time when our communities have never felt less safe. If the Chancellor really wanted to end austerity, he would give Cleveland police their £9 million back. Police in our county need the resources to be able to do their job. My constituents have a right to feel safe in their community and to know that the police will be there for them when they are needed.

Why is my community different and why is Cleveland so special? Cleveland is a great place to live. Our communities are strong, and we are a good place in which to do business, but policing our area is a challenge.

We have particularly high needs: the highest levels of antisocial behaviour in the country; the second highest levels of domestic violence; an increasing level of recorded crime; the highest levels of drug abuse in the country; high deprivation; and serious and organised criminals involved in the supply of drugs. The Government promised us a Budget to end austerity, but the fact remains that Cleveland police is now £39 million a year worse off than it would have been, with more cuts to come.

Austerity has always been a political choice. Over the past eight years, time and again, the Conservatives have been able to find giveaways and sweeteners for a few people at the top while leaving communities in places like Stockton South to pick up the pieces. Think about the woman in Parkfield in my constituency who contacted me in tears because she says she has no choice but to sell her home just to get away from a small number of criminals in the area who act with impunity. Or think about the police officer who got in touch and offered me a picture of a force working its hardest, but unable to do its job, with low staff morale and significant concerns about a loss of public trust. “We desperately need the support of Government,” the officer told me. There is crime that officers want to tackle—crime that they want to fight—but it carries on with impunity because they do not have the numbers to be there when they are most needed.

Since 2010, Cleveland police has lost about 500 officers, yet next year the Government plan to make Cleveland’s thin blue line even thinner, with a further cut of an even greater £9 million. Nine million pounds of cuts means even fewer police officers at a time when our communities have never felt less safe. If the Chancellor really wanted to end austerity, he would give Cleveland police their £9 million back. Police in our county need the resources to be able to do their job. My constituents have a right to feel safe in their community and to know that the police will be there for them when they are needed.

The Conservatives used to call themselves the party of law and order. How can Conservative Members carry on saying that with a straight face to some of the people who visit me at my surgeries, and probably theirs too? This Government will carry on fighting among themselves long after the grand gestures of Budget week have been forgotten; I and my Labour colleagues will carry on fighting for the proper funding that our local police forces need to keep our constituents safe.

4.26 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), and I will pick up on one or two of the themes that he mentioned. I want to touch on the NHS and policing before turning to employment and, finally, the family.

I know that my constituents will welcome the additional funding for the NHS, with £20.5 billion more by 2023-24—£394 million per week—and average real growth rates
of 3.4% per annum. That is significantly more than Labour promised at the last general election. Importantly, with this money there will also be reforms and improvements. That will be welcomed and will make a big difference to our NHS in Dorset and Poole. I look forward to further announcements from the Secretary of State clarifying exactly how this will affect our area.

On policing, I was pleased yesterday when the Chancellor specifically mentioned the submission by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). The Chancellor said that he recognised that policing is under pressure from the changing nature of crime. Furthermore—the hon. Member for Stockton South did not mention this—the Chancellor told the House that the Home Secretary will review police spending powers and further options for reform when he presents the provisional police funding settlement in December. I strongly support my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire in his campaign for a fairer funding formula for our policing, because that will make a difference in my part of the country, Dorset. I look forward to working with him on policing.

I want to focus a little on employment, and then on the family. I welcome the Chancellor’s comments and revised estimates on future employment growth. I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on youth employment. Each month, we look at the statistics on employment and unemployment relating to young people—not just because statistics are important but because they affect individuals’ lives, including young people moving on to the first rung of their career ladder. At our meeting this month, we celebrated the fact that youth unemployment is now at its lowest level since comparable records began, at 10.8%. Of course there is more to do and further that we can go, but for interest and comparison purposes, the EU average is 14.8%.

Our current all-party inquiry is on social mobility—another theme that has been mentioned in this debate—and in particular we are looking at young care leavers moving into work. In that regard, I very much welcome the Department for Education’s announcement last week about the care leaver covenant. I look forward to working with him on policing.

I turn to the family. I am grateful for the work that the Centre for Social Justice does in this area. I heard from two care leavers about the importance of the care leaver covenant. I look forward to hearing more about that from the Under-Secretary of State for Education and the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), when he comes to our all-party group in December. At this month’s APPG meeting, we heard from two care leavers about the importance of stability and having a consistent mentor figure in their lives. Stability and family support are so often crucial when young people move into the world of work.

I turn to the family. I am grateful for the work that the Centre for Social Justice does in this area. I have learned from the CSJ that despite the increased risk of poverty, it is estimated that the Treasury spends about £1 on preventive spending for every £6,000 it spends on responding to the consequences of family breakdown. Furthermore, it appears that marriage is disappearing in policy making, just as much as it is disappearing in our poorest communities. Some 87% of high earners marry, and 24% of low earners marry. The rich get married and stay together, and the poor do not.

Why does that matter? Because where there is poverty, family breakdown is often not far behind, and while poverty is often a driver of family breakdown, crucially so too is family breakdown a driver of poverty. According to the Department for Work and Pensions, children who experience family breakdown are twice as likely to fall into poverty—[Interruption.] Despite the chuntering from those on the Opposition Benches, the public really get this. A recent CSJ poll confirmed that young people aged 14 to 17 aspire to a lasting relationship just as much as they aspire to a long-term career; they find that just as important. It is clear that support for the family is important for social mobility and for alleviating poverty. Marriage and the family should not be disappearing from Government policy making. When it comes to the Budget and our public services, it seems to me that more could be spent on preventing family breakdown, which would mean that less was spent on the consequences.

Finally, I welcome the increase in support for universal credit—a policy that I have wholeheartedly and repeatedly supported. When it was last debated in the Chamber, almost the moment that I sat down, I received an email from a resident in Dorset, of which it is worth reading a significant part. The email reads:

“I have just seen Michael taking part in a debate today on universal credit”—people do actually watch these proceedings, strange though that may seem. It goes on:

“I have been in receipt of universal credit since March this year and have generally had a very positive experience. I greatly appreciate the guidance and support from my work coach, the simplicity of use of the online system”.

It is not starry-eyed, because it mentions a concern about moving into part-time work and the relationship with council tax support, but it concludes:

“I love the fact that all aspects of my life are dealt with centrally. It is crucial that Michael emphasises the positive aspects of the universal credit system and that the Government continues to roll it out.”

Given yesterday’s Budget statement, universal credit will make it even more worthwhile to be in work. The work allowance increase is progressive, and Opposition Members should welcome it. I look forward to more positive comments about that policy, possibly even from those on the Opposition Benches.

4.33 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): This was a Budget for “the strivers, the grafters and the carers who are the backbone of our communities and our economy.”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 653.]

Or so we were told—I would like to extend an invitation to the Chancellor to come to my weekly advice surgery and say that to the dozens of families I meet every single week who are trapped in insecure gig economy work, who are being failed by universal credit and who cannot afford to put a private rented sector roof over their head. I will talk about each of those issues in turn.

Let us start with workers’ rights. The Chancellor stated that delivering higher wages for those in work is core to his mission, yet our national living wage is littered with loopholes and used by some of the biggest organisations to cut terms, conditions and take-home pay. Those organisations should be named and shamed—I am referring to the likes of Marks & Spencer, Zizzi, Ginsters, Le Pain Quotidien, Caffe Nero and countless others that have sought legislative loopholes, against the spirit of the law.
Only this morning, I heard from one of the thousands of B&Q staff members being forced to move from nights to days. Just two years ago, one lady lost her annual bonus and her Sunday premium. She works the twilight shift to enable her to care for her two children. If she keeps her job, by the end of the month she will earn £1.50 an hour less than she currently does, but she cannot work the new shift because she cannot care for her children as well. She is not being offered redundancy. I ask those on the Treasury Bench to use their influence to encourage B&Q to offer redundancy to the 441 twilight shift workers who cannot at the moment take the hours that are being offered to them.

The Chancellor talked about protecting employment for lower-paid workers. Does that mean that the Government will follow the lead of British Telecom and the Communication Workers Union by calling for the abolition of exploitative “pay between assignments” contracts that keep agency staff on low pay for years at a time, even though they lack a gap between assignments?

On housing, which is a supposed Government priority, I was expecting a little more than the few lines that we heard yesterday. I welcome the proposed measures and money, but they are simply not of a scale that will make the difference that is so desperately needed. Solving the housing crisis is the politics of “and”: we should lift the money, but they are simply not of a scale that will make a difference and we need to get more land in the right places...for housing.

Do Treasury Ministers agree that we should de-designate the 19,334 hectares of unbuilt green-belt land within a 10-minute walk of London train stations? This supposed green belt includes a car wash, a waste plant, a disused airfield and even a lap dancing club. At no environmental cost, that is enough space for almost 1 million new homes.

Finally, I turn to universal credit. I appreciate that I do not have much time left to speak, but I must ask those on the Treasury Bench for their help with Mr C, who applied for universal credit at the beginning of September. As the result of a routine operation, he had an artery severed, and the likelihood is that his foot will have to be removed. He lives in one room above a shop, which he shares with his sister, who is in her 50s. Since the beginning of September, we have attempted to get a home visit for him so that he can claim the money he is entitled to. More than eight weeks later, in spite of getting the help of the local jobcentre manager, and in spite of numerous calls and letters to everybody we can think of, that man is still awaiting his appointment. Surely that is absolutely wrong.

This is a Budget with an absence of hope. The era of austerity is said to be coming to an end, but for now it continues to proceed, dragging almost a decade of damage in its wake. Affecting people without homes for their children, people trying to claim benefits and people who just want a fair week’s pay for a fair week’s work.
We also have to provide a much needed boost to small businesses that were left behind by the last Labour Government, to ensure unemployment remains at a record low and that the longevity of our high streets is maintained. Again, that takes difficult decisions, so I welcome the announcement in yesterday’s Budget to provide up-front support through the business rates system, cutting bills for retail properties with a rateable value of below £51,000, which will benefit 90% of retail properties. I also welcome the addition of the £675 million future high streets fund. That means that someone running a small business will see their tax come down by a third and their high street restored.

It is not just about getting out of the way of small business but about standing up for those specific issues. It is about making sure that those same small businesses are not disadvantaged by an overbearing digital marketplace that is not paying its fair share—a real David and Goliath battle. I was therefore delighted to hear in the Chancellor’s statement yesterday that the Government will introduce a new 2% tax on the revenues of certain digital businesses to ensure that the amount of tax paid in the UK reflects the value they derive from their UK operations, ensuring an even ground between businesses on our high streets and online. It is not Amazon or Facebook that are the lifeblood of this country; it is the small businesses in constituencies like mine.

That is why small business is important. It means more business and more tax collected and more economic growth, and, yes, a strong economy means more money for our public services. I therefore welcome the Chancellor’s announcement yesterday of additional funding, and an indication that the hard work is starting to pay off. This means £2 billion more for mental health, and the long-term plan for the NHS will commit further funding to help achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health services. That means anyone experiencing a crisis can call the NHS line 24/7, and it means more mental health ambulances, increased community support and comprehensive support at every major accident and emergency by 2024.

I have discussed school funding with headteachers in my constituency. This Budget means £400 million more for schools this year, with £10,000 allocated to the average primary and £50,000 to the average secondary to help schools buy the equipment they need. It means £1 billion more for defence across this year and next, ensuring our world-class armed forces can face the new threats and build on the UK’s record of spending more on defence than any NATO member except the US.

With unemployment at its lowest since 1975 and employment at a near record high, the years of financial hardship endured by the people of this country due to Labour’s inability to fix the roof while the sun was shining is now a thing of the past. With this Budget and a strong economy, constituents and businesses in my constituency of Southport can be assured that this Government are delivering for them and that their hard work is paying off.

4.45 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The financial health of industry in my area is absolutely critical. The attempts yesterday by the Chancellor to bury the bad news for industry, in particular energy-intensive industries, did not help at all. He did not mention it, but he did not bury the news very deep either: it is there for all to see on page 47 of the Red Book. If the changes in carbon taxes materialise in response to Brexit, then individual firms millions of pounds. The carbon emissions tax is significantly higher than the average emissions trading scheme price over the past 12 months, which was just £12.30. This would increase the cost of carbon for UK installations across the country, currently covered by ETS, by 30%.

The Chancellor acknowledges the increasing high total carbon price, but proposes to freeze it at £18 a tonne of carbon dioxide for 2021. He might think that is an ambitious move, but these plans come with little notice and a particularly high cost for industry. Firms like CF Fertilisers in Stockton are significantly exposed to the additional extra costs. The EU energy trading scheme is a market-based instrument for which companies had developed a strategy over time to ensure they were able to comply. Now, on top of the perfect storm of high electricity and gas prices, this carbon tax, coupled with the doubling of the gas climate change levy, is a very real issue for energy-intensive industries.

The Government did publish a document on this last night. It betrays a fundamental change in policy since the Brexit vote, with no consultation with industry along the way. In the worst Brexit scenario of all, EIs are being given an expensive fait accompli with no notice, no discussion and no impact assessment. This makes industry very nervous. Rolled together, all this serves to make the UK an unattractive place for EIs to do business in the future.

The Chancellor could have helped an industry facing such a dilemma by giving some indication of Government support for carbon capture, use and storage, but he did not. As I have said on numerous occasions, Teesside is ripe for investment in carbon capture, use and storage. The industry needs some indication that the Government are capable of making the right call on this matter. Perhaps once the task group on CCS reports we will hear something more positive from the Chancellor in the new year.

This is my ninth speech in a Budget debate, and in every single one I have talked about health inequalities in my area and the need for a 21st century hospital in Stockton to help tackle them. Stockton was promised a new hospital, but in 2010 the coalition Government scrapped it while making sure that similar plans went ahead where there just happened to be Government MPs of both the blue and yellow. Let me outline why we need to solve the social care crisis and build a new hospital in Stockton.

Nationally, on average, a boy born in one of the most affluent areas of England will outlive one born in the poorest parts by 8.4 years. In Stockton, where life expectancy for a man in the town centre ward is 64, that gap is around double at 15 years. Incidentally, that life expectancy age is the same as in Ethiopia. Our children in these inner-city areas are living in poverty. They are more likely to be undernourished, more susceptible to all manner of illnesses and more likely to end up in care. Older adults are more likely to be ill, given a lifetime of hard work in the heavy industries. One in five babies in Stockton is exposed to cigarette toxins in the womb because their mother smokes while pregnant. That was in 2015-16. That year, there was a significantly higher
rate of hospital admissions attributed to smoking than the national average. According to the British Lung Foundation, people in the north-east have the highest chronic obstructive pulmonary disease mortality ratio in the country. The English average for children achieving a good level of development at five years old is at 60%. In Stockton, this is just 50%.

Dr Paul Williams: Does my hon. Friend agree that the cuts to public health funding have had a significant impact on Stockton Council’s ability to deal with some of those health inequalities, and is he as disappointed as I am not to have heard about increases in public health funding in the Budget?

Alex Cunningham: Most certainly. My hon. Friend and I represent between us some of the most difficult areas in Stockton, with high levels of smoking and drinking that make the national average pale into total insignificance. We desperately need that additional funding, so I most certainly agree with him.

Our local North Tees hospital does an exemplary job in the most difficult circumstances, yet it could do so much better in a modern building with services that are required by jowl and where people can be treated in wards rather than converted corridors. That is why we need a new hospital in Stockton and why I will mention that in every Budget speech I ever make until I get it.

Still on health, the police and crime commissioner for Cleveland has been doing excellent work on the introduction of heroin-assisted treatment in neighbouring Middlesbrough—a project that the experts believe will help to save lives and money and reduce crime across Teesside—but he needs Government support to make it the best that it can be. I hope that there will be a full Government commitment to that initiative.

On policing, I am really worried, like my colleague next door in Stockton South, about policing in our area. Like most others, the Cleveland police force area has been short-changed by this Government over many years and the police know that they can no longer deliver the full service that is needed. As my hon. Friend said, over the last eight years, the Government grant for policing and crime in Cleveland has been cut by around 24%. He also outlined in detail why we need that extra money, yet Cleveland is harder hit by cuts than most other forces because of how it is categorised. The county is largely rural, but the vast majority of the population is in inner-city areas, with the same challenges of the cities, yet we do not get the same level of funding. Let me be clear: there will be severe repercussions for public safety and criminal justice in Cleveland if the people do not get more funding.

On education, the Chancellor announced some one-off funding for schools to pay for little extras, but it is teachers and action on pay that they need. Stockton’s branch of the National Education Union visited my surgery on Friday. It wants to see the Government fund the full pay award rather than leave schools to do it. It also wants all teachers treated fairly, which the pay award fails to do. I hope that they will hear something better from the Government in future.

I simply plead again with the Chancellor to do the right thing by Stockton: help us to tackle the health inequalities that we have; help us to deliver the public health programmes that help to educate people about the choices that they have in life; and please find a way to build us a new hospital.

4.52 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in favour of this Budget, which continues the important work that was begun in 2010. A lot has been achieved. We have record employment, with 3.3 million more jobs and 1,000 more people in work every single day. I am particularly proud that we have halved youth unemployment, meaning that more young people can get a good start in life. I meet them all the time in Harborough, and it is a huge pleasure.

Incomes are now rising the fastest that they have in a decade—most rapidly at the bottom end of the labour market—and the national living wage has already increased the wages of people on it by £2,750 a year. That will go up to about £5,000 a year, and combined with increases in the personal allowance, that has raised the income of someone working full time on the national living wage by 44% since 2010 alone. That is one reason why inequality is now lower than at any time under Labour.

The deficit is also down by nine tenths and debt is falling as a share of the economy—in fact, debt as a proportion of GDP is now forecast to go down by a whopping 11 percentage points. The corner has definitely been turned. In the Budget, the Chancellor has helped small businesses in my constituency. He has helped with the cost of living. He not only has debt falling but has a lot of headroom to respond to the needs of our public services. I will come back to that point in a moment, but first, let me note some of the progress we have seen in our public services in recent years, starting with schools.

The proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools has gone up from 66% to 86% since 2010, which is a huge improvement. Thanks to the national fair funding formula, we are addressing the historical unfairness that has seen places such as Leicestershire do badly. As a result, funding in my constituency over the next two years will go up twice as fast as the national average—and, through things such as the sugar tax and the condition improvement fund, we have seen big improvements such as the new school hall in South Kilworth.

We have also seen many improvements in our schools that are not to do with just spending more money. We have ended the right of appeal against exclusions so that we protect teachers and other pupils against disruption and violence; we have introduced year one phonics screening to nip problems in the bud; we have ended grade inflation and restored rigour; we have stopped Ofsted being so overbearing, which many teachers will welcome; and we have enabled innovations such as the brilliant free schools, which are now the highest-performing type of school in our system.

The improvements go beyond schools and into further education. FE colleges in my constituency can now teach the new T-levels, a new, more rigorous qualification with 25% more funding per student and 50% more hours taught and worked.

Emma Hardy: Would these be the same T-levels that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills said she would not allow her own children to sit?
Neil O'Brien: The new T-levels will fix a problem that has been known about for 100 years and give us a more technical system that will be more like the German one and will be the envy of the world.

I welcome the £20 billion for the NHS—a staggering £400 million extra a week—and the fact that we have a vigorous new Health Secretary who is bringing new technology into the NHS in order that it will no longer be the place with the most fax machines and payers in the world. If you really love something, you want it to be the best it can be and you make it the best it can be.

I welcome the fact that crime is down since 2010 and that we protected police spending in real terms in the 2015 spending review, and I welcome the £200 million a year extra in the Budget to counter serious youth violence and the money for counter-terrorism, but I hope that those are a down payment on a strong settlement for law and order in the spending review. I have been unhappy with the lenient sentences people have received in recent cases, such as the motorcyclist who repeatedly kicked a police officer in the head but was spared jail—that was a mistake; an unprovoked assault and wounding in Market Harborough that did not lead to imprisonment. Assaults on prison officers in HMP Gartree were not even prosecuted. We should be jailing more people for longer, and if we need to find additional resource to do it, it will be money well spent.

In the battle to get our terrible deficit under control, a corner has been turned. In the 2010 spending review, annual average real growth in departmental spending was minus 3%; in 2015, it was minus 1.3%; and from next year, it will be plus 1.2%—a clear difference in direction. Some people now argue that, if we exclude everything that is going up, such as health, defence and aid, other things are going down. I have two things to say about that. First, yes, absolutely the NHS has been prioritised—because it is the people’s priority. Secondly, the Chancellor has sensibly left himself some headroom. With national debt as a percentage of GDP now forecast to fall by 11 percentage points over the forecast period, compared to 7.5 percentage points before, we now have some headroom.

Only through a thorough spending review can we find out how much money we need on top of more efficiency. Once that review is complete, if the Chancellor feels he needs to use some of that headroom to invest in strong public services, he will have my full support, but while such a balanced approach has my support, the country is in no position to go on a massive spending spree. To use a diet metaphor, we have been through a huge spending splurge. We are an ageing society, and will be the envy of the world. If you really love something, you want it to be the best it can be and you make it the best it can be.

I am very concerned that no extra funding has been provided for regular policing, because the cuts to policing budgets have hit Lincolnshire hard. I am also worried that three quarters of the £12 billion of welfare cuts announced after the 2015 election remain in place. It is not tinkering around the edges of income thresholds
that will address the callous and chaotic roll-out of universal credit in my constituency of Lincoln. Proper funding and a route out of poverty are needed. I hope that the links between poverty and ill health need no explanation. It is a national disgrace that, thanks to this Budget, food banks will remain a feature of our society.

Under this Government, the NHS has experienced the slowest spending growth in its history. After eight years in which NHS budget increases have averaged just 1.4%, the Government’s 3.4% increase is, to quote the Health Foundation, “simply not enough”. This Budget will barely keep our NHS afloat, let alone reverse eight years of neglect. As a nurse, I saw at first hand the appalling damage the Government have done to our health services. I get fed up with hearing people say how good our health workers are and, “Let’s give them a pat on the back.” Actually, let’s pay them properly, because they cannot spend a patronising pat on the back; they cannot pay their rent with it or buy food with it.

An estimated 4.3 million people are on NHS waiting lists and last year 2.5 million people waited four hours or longer in A&E. With 41,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS in England and more nurses leaving the profession than joining it—some of them are my friends—the Government must reinstate nursing bursaries to reverse the 32% drop in applications since they were scrapped in 2016. I support nursing apprenticeships, but they are not delivering the numbers. We have to reinstate bursaries if we want the numbers. It is all right saying that we will fund however many places, but we have to train those nurses and we have to give them the money to be able to afford to train. I know; I have been there. I remind the House how expensive the current reliance on agency nurses is. That expense is coming out of the public purse. It just makes no sense not to have bursaries and trained nurses.

The insufficient funding increase for the NHS is further undermined by the Government’s disregard for public health services. Public health budgets have decreased by 5.2% since 2014. Those cuts have consequences for our local communities; 85% of councils are planning to reduce their public health budgets this financial year.

The Government have been similarly short-sighted in slashing funding for social care, which has been cut by an estimated £7 billion since the Tories came to power. While the Chancellor allocated an increase to social care grants, that will not close the social care funding gap, which could be over £2 billion by 2020. Age UK estimates that 1.4 million older people do not have access to the care and support they need.

In conclusion, I welcome the Government’s commitment to increase mental health funding by £2 billion, but the Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that double this amount is needed to achieve true parity of esteem between mental and physical health. That sum is meaningless; it is simply not enough. With one in four of us experiencing a mental health problem each year, there is no excuse for the Government’s half-hearted approach. The Government’s cuts to mental health, social care and public health also drive demand for NHS use, creating a bleak cycle in which underfunding places further strain on staff and service delivery. I know that; I have been there first hand.

This Budget shows that austerity is part of the Conservatives’ political ideology and make-up; it is central to their small state, low public investment approach to managing the economy. We should not expect anything other than austerity while we have this Government. To truly end austerity, we need a general election and a Labour Government, and we on this side of the House say, “Bring it on.”

5.6 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is, of course, a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), but unlike her, I choose to welcome the Budget, which will deliver genuine benefits to my constituents in Redditch.

First, I welcome the overall framework of this Budget—the fact that the money being spent for my constituents comes from growth in the economy. It comes from jobs and lower taxes, which means that my constituents will have more money in their pockets.

I am glad to see the shadow Chancellor back in his place. He referred to leafy Surrey, and we are very proud of our leaves in Redditch, but I doubt that that was what he had in mind. This is a Budget for middle England. My constituents come from all walks of life, and we cannot get much more middle England than somewhere like Redditch. We welcome the £20.5 billion to be spent on health up to 2023-24, a massive increase of 3.4% every year.

Members will know that I have spoken often about the acute trust that services my constituents—or rather, that lets them down on a regular basis, unfortunately. This matter is dear to my heart because the trust is one of the worst performing in the country. As the local MP, I inherited a flawed process that involved the removal of services from our local hospital, the Alex, before the trust as a whole was ready to take them on. We are coming to the end of that painful process and seeing more money being put into our local trust, with £16 million already delivered to it, but I want that trust to hurry up and get itself out of special measures. I consistently advocate that and lobby for it. I am meeting the trust and urging it to submit its business case so that it can give my constituents the good services they need and deserve.

To sound a note of positivity, there is capital investment in that hospital and a new urgent centre for the Alex. These steps are to be welcomed, but there is more to do, so I welcome the fact that money is coming into our NHS more generally.

I want to pick up in particular on the fact that we are focusing on technological investments in the NHS more widely. I would like the Health Secretary to come to Worcester and Redditch to see what we are doing there with the innovative bed capacity app. That is helping the flow-through of patients, which will of course help more patients to be seen more quickly at the front door.

The Government have made up to £10 billion more available for social care in the three years up to 2019-20. There are lots of pressures in Worcestershire in adult and children’s social care. There is rising demand in children’s social care. I note that local authorities are able to make bids for a fund, and I would like Worcestershire to be able to do so, as it has rising need and demand.

As the daughter of a dementia sufferer, adult social care is close to my heart, and I have seen how much pressure there is on that service. The number of people over the age of 85 needing 24-hour care in England is
projected to almost double to 446,000 by 2035, so I welcome the fact that there will be a long-term solution in place following the Green Paper on health and social care.

Many colleagues have touched on mental health, and I am going to touch on one specific aspect, about which I have already spoken in the Chamber: the menopause. We had a fantastic debate on that subject not long ago in this very place, and it was a real pleasure to be supported by colleagues from all across the House. I pay particular tribute my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who responded to the debate for the Government. In fact, two male MPs spoke, and they put a real focus on the issue of mental health at the time of the menopause. That focus is really welcomed by women up and down the country.

I would like to make a plea for some of the additional mental health funding to be used for issues relating to the menopause, because that is a time when women battle with mental health issues. Surely if two men in this Chamber can talk about the menopause, businesses and other organisations up and down the country can do so as well. I want to put on record my thanks to my male colleagues from all parties who have pledged to support me further on this so that we can stop the stigma of the menopause and stop it being a taboo subject. We need to raise awareness, because this affects people’s mums, wives and partners, and the women they work with. It is good that we are raising awareness around this critical issue.

There were a number of welcome announcements in the Budget, and I want to focus on the air ambulance service. I have been privileged to meet a wonderful woman called Jenny Ashman, who is a volunteer from Inkberrow in my constituency. She is known locally as “Jenny from the chopper”, because she has raised nearly £2 million for the midlands air ambulance services, and I am sure that she will be jumping for joy at the announcement of £10 million for the air ambulance services up and down the country.

There is a lot to welcome in this Budget, but as time is short, I shall finish by saying that the Budget speaks to the aspirations of middle England. It is a practical Budget that puts money back into the pockets of my constituents in Redditch. We are seeing tax cuts for 30 million people, which will mean that they have more money to spend. That will put money back into the economy.

I have been dismayed to hear the negativity coming from the other side of the House. The Opposition have no answers to the problems facing our country. We remember the legacy that was left by their Government and the note from their Treasury Minister that there was no money left. That was the legacy that we inherited, yet all they have come up with in the intervening time is a plan that would cost every man, woman and child in this country £3.5 billion. They would load £1 trillion of debt on to our hard-working citizens, and they are still blind to the misery that they inflicted on my constituents. Their comments are outdated and patronising. People should come to Redditch. They would see that, although my constituents are not rich, they are rich in spirit. They come from all walks of life, and they will welcome this Budget.
streets in towns and cities up and down the country, but we hear nothing about the families who live in temporary accommodation or people who sofa-surf, as they are not deemed as having priority need for housing. That is the Government’s biggest shame. It epitomises their neglect of too many citizens and reflects not just their failure to ensure that enough houses are built for us all, with social and affordable homes as part of the mix, but their ill-thought-out social security policies, such as universal credit.

Universal credit has been a disaster from start to finish, and it has now been revealed to be driving homelessness. One shelter says UC is the reason why a third of its residents are in it. UC tenants of the housing association First Choice Homes in Oldham are in more than £2.5 million of rent arrears. Research suggests that nearly one in five people in Oldham struggles to pay a social rent. UC is part of that problem. Policy in Practice estimates that the changes to UC announced in the Budget will not have a significant effect. It says 345,000 more households will still be worse off and 29,000 will be no better off. Disabled people will still be worse off. People in employment will see some improvements, but self-employed people will see none at all.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is a well-known expert in this area, which she has spoken up about many times. Does she agree that the Government’s inability to look at people in the round—particularly at their mental ill health, their disability, their poverty and their lack of access to work—drives some of the problems she highlights, including those with universal credit?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. The human misery caused by such an inhumane policy cannot be underestimated.

L contacted my office recently after her UC was suddenly stopped because her son, B, has severe learning difficulties and L, who is the main carer, did not realise that he would have to make a separate claim once he had reached his 19th birthday. When the money stopped, L had nothing—she did not know why it had stopped and nobody contacted her. It was an absolute disaster for her, and she said:

“At times I just want to end it all...it’s just so hard and I get no support or respite."

L is a candidate for the new mental health crisis fund that the Government have set out—a product of their universal credit policy. On top of this, the investment in UC does not offset other cuts to social security, with welfare spending set to fall in the next couple of years.

Most worrying are the cuts affecting disabled people, which have not been addressed in the Budget. In fact, according to the OBR, disabled people will be worse off. As the United Nations said last year, this Government are presiding over a “human catastrophe”. The Equality and Human Rights Commission estimates that families with a disabled adult and a disabled child will have lost 13% of their income—£5,500 a year—by 2022. This is on top of colossal cuts across other Departments. What about their help from the Chancellor? What about their bright future?

We have done a lot—the former Labour Government did a huge amount to improve life expectancy, and to lift disabled people and children out of poverty—but we need to do more. The inequalities in our society are getting worse, not better. These inequalities are socially reproduced, so they can be changed, and that should give us all hope. But political will is needed to tackle them, and I am afraid that this Government just do not have it in them.

5.21 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): May I start by apologising for being absent for much of this debate because I was chairing the Health and Social Care Committee? I also declare a personal interest, as three members of my immediate family are employed as NHS doctors.

We need to take a whole-system approach to health—to think of it not just as the NHS, but as a system including social care, public health, the prevention arm and training budgets. I return to a point that I made in an intervention: I wholly welcome the uplift in the NHS budget, but the increase in the NHS England budget that will take place between 2018-19 and 2019-20 is £7.2 billion, whereas the uplift in the wider health budget in the Red Book is only £6.3 billion. It concerns me that this might indicate that some of the uplift in the NHS England budget will come by way of being taken out of other aspects of the health budget, particularly the Public Health England budget, as we have seen in previous years. I hope that the Minister will touch on that in his response.

Jonathan Ashworth: I think that the hon. Lady may have left the debate to attend her Committee when I re-emphasised her point directly to the Secretary of State, who told us that we would have to wait for the spending review. Would she share my disappointment if the Government tried to pull the same trick that they pulled three years ago, and actually misled us or gave us bogus figures for NHS spending that did not include public health expenditure, capital and training?

Dr Wollaston: We need absolute transparency around health spending, and to take not only a whole-system approach but a long-term view.

Public health is the prevention arm of the system, and taking money out of public health has a serious impact on future spending and our ability to tackle health inequalities. It would be very troubling indeed if much of this uplift came directly from a public health cut. We need to be specific about that, and it is not sufficient to wait for the spending review to clarify that point; I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us further about what it means. People need to plan for the future, so if £900 million is going to be taken out of public health grants, we need to know that now.

When we ask the public which parts of the system they prioritise, public health tends to be at the bottom of the list. It is up to the Government to look at the evidence, and they must be clear that the evidence shows that we must focus unrelentingly on the prevention arm of healthcare. That is the right thing to do, and it is where we have the greatest chance of tackling the burning injustices of health inequality, so it is an important point to address.

The other aspect I want to touch on is social care. The Health and Social Care Committee has just had a sitting with the Care Quality Commission on its excellent “State of Care” report. The report comments on “fragility,”
and the report of a couple of years ago talked about “a tipping point.” The CQC told us that that tipping point has been passed for many people in social care. The interaction between social care and the health service is so close that, if we do not focus on social care, we are simply tipping more costs on to the health service.

Of course it is welcome that there will be an in-year increase for adult social care of £240 million this year and £650 million next year, but it is widely recognised that, because of the extraordinary increase in demand and pressure—driven not just by the welcome fact that we are living longer but by the great increase in the number of people with multiple long-term conditions living to an older age and by younger, working-age adults living with multiple complex needs—social care needs more than £1 billion a year just to stand still, so we need to go further.

I recognise that much of this will come alongside next year’s social care Green Paper, which we are all looking forward to, but the system is under considerable challenge. I hope the Minister will recognise in his closing remarks that we are not there yet on social care. He needs to say what we are going to do in the long term to address our social care needs. As I have said before, we will require an approach that involves the Labour Front Benchers, too. We need to see political consensus, otherwise the politically difficult decisions on funding will not get through the House.

If there are to be cuts to public health, the Government will have an even greater responsibility to provide other levers in their public health policy to reduce demand in the system. The Chancellor specifically referred to wanting to reduce the tragedy of lives lost to suicide. Unfortunately, at the same time, the delay in the reduction of the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals means that we have passed up on an important opportunity to address the misery of gambling addiction. That is a hugely wasted opportunity. Likewise, there is a missed opportunity to look at what has happened in Scotland on minimum unit pricing to make sure we are addressing some of the key drivers of public health problems. The Government cannot duck that if we are to see cuts to the public health grant.

Finally, there is the impact of Brexit. The Chancellor has said that there will be £4.2 billion for preparations for a no-deal Brexit. I am afraid that the costs will be far higher. The Health and Social Care Committee recently heard from the pharmaceutical industry that it is having to plough hundreds of millions of pounds into preparing for no deal. That is phenomenal and inexcusable waste; it is money down the drain. I hope the Government will rethink their policy, because no version of Brexit will provide more money for the NHS. There is a Brexit penalty, not a Brexit dividend, and I hope both Front-Bench teams will come together and agree that, ultimately, we need the informed consent of the British people for whatever version of Brexit we come up with, with the option to remain and properly use the money instead of the problems people were facing. So where are we 12 months on? In more than 60 hours of discussion at more than 40 events in this year’s consultation, all I found was greater concern and the feeling that we are closer to that tipping point. There was greater fear of the rise in violent crime and antisocial behaviour. We have some really impressive and committed police officers leading the fight against knife crime in Sheffield, supported by some great community groups, but we need to recognise the perfect storm that has been created by a combination of Government policies. Eight years of deep cuts to local services has decimated youth provision, led to rising school exclusions and seen falling police numbers—we have lost about a third of our police staff across South Yorkshire.

From the National Audit Office to the Police Federation, and to the Home Secretary himself, everyone agrees that police forces are underfunded. So when the Prime Minister promised the end of austerity, we might have anticipated that things would change in the Budget, but they did not change—not a bit. There was not a penny more for core police funding, nor were there any funds to rebuild youth services.

Nor was there an adequate response to the crisis in mental health, which was another significant issue raised right across my constituency. People told me of their difficulties in accessing services and of treatment waiting times that are simply too long. Young people in particular told me that they were waiting more than six months from referral to their first appointment with child and adolescent mental health services. So although I welcome the extra funding for mental health, we must recognise that it is simply mental health crisis provision, as the Chancellor described it. Of course, such provision needs to be properly funded, because we have a crisis in mental health, particularly for our young people. They want to know why they need to get to crisis point in their mental health before the system responds. A mental health crisis hotline is no substitute for proper face-to-face support. And what has happened to parity of esteem between mental and physical health? The £2 billion going to mental health is just 10% of the funding allocated to the NHS overall, so there is no parity of esteem there—in fact, we are moving further in the wrong direction, and that is a missed opportunity.

The Chancellor missed another opportunity to do the right thing by pushing back the start of the £2 maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals to October 2019. That delay means that people will die—people like my constituent, Jack Ritchie, who took his own life aged just 24, having been, in the words of his mum Liz, “groomed by gambling companies”. Jack began gambling while at secondary school, playing on fixed odds betting machines at the nearby bookies. We all know, and the Government have admitted, that these machines are the “crack cocaine of gambling”, with players winning or losing up to £100 every 20 seconds. So what is the Chancellor’s answer for Jack’s grieving family, whose...
This Budget does not mark the end of austerity. The NHS has experienced the slowest spending growth in its history. When the Government created the Budget, clearly ignoring the issues caused by their austerity, it seems they had 99 problems but did not consider the state of the NHS to be one if they believed that £20.5 billion was sufficient to repair the damage caused by eight years of under-investment.

According to the Health Foundation, the £20.5 billion promised is simply not enough. The £2 billion that has been announced for mental health is welcome, but it is half what is needed, and let me be clear: this is not new money and these are not new resources. These financial gimmicks fool no one. The Health Secretary has said that it would take a generation to establish parity of esteem under this Government. However, people with severe mental health conditions cannot afford to wait five years for meaningful action from this Government. Too many people, including children, are already waiting months to access the treatment that they need, leading to a devastating mental health crisis.

In my constituency, there has been a real-terms cut of 10.6% in adult social care, almost double the national average, and the Government consider their announcement of £650 million for long-term adult social care services an accomplishment when it is less than half what the King’s Fund estimates is required to meet demand. Nearly 1.5 million elderly people are not getting the care that they need—an increase of 20% in just two years. The sum of £84 million over the next five years to expand children’s social care programmes is pitiful compared with the £3 billion needed by 2025. Services are overstretched, and the recent trends in the level of funding are unsustainable and unacceptable. The needs of Peterborough—my constituency—have been attended to on the cheap for far too long. As a consequence, cracks are beginning to appear in our services. Our needs have not been properly or adequately assessed, or indeed addressed, and the current settlement is blatantly below par.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the biggest challenges facing Peterborough hospital, which serves her constituency and in which I work, is the financial burden of the PFI that was used to build the hospital? It is a beautiful hospital, but so much money was spent on it that we are burdened with this PFI. It was a Labour Government who did that and we are now having to pay for it.

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Yes, I know that very well about the PFI, which is why Labour is seeking to end PFIs. [Interruption.] Before she says that we signed it, I would like to talk about now and the fact that PFIs actually came in under John Major. Talking about now, Government are pursuing efficiency to the point of ineffectiveness. I end on this poignant note: investment now is lower in relation to GDP and we are ranked 22nd in the world. The time for warm words is over. Austerity has dire consequences and a little extra just will not cut it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Writing earlier this week in the Welsh edition of The Sunday Times, I labelled yesterday’s fiscal event a “fantasy Budget”. That is because, of course, it did not mention the big elephant in the room, which is Brexit.
[Jonathan Edwards]

If the withdrawal agreement does not make it through the House of Commons—that is working on the assumption that there will be a withdrawal agreement between the British state and the European Union—the Chancellor will be back here in a matter of months with an emergency Budget. I hope that, in such a scenario, more sensible minds might prevail with a policy put forward based on extending article 50 coupled with a people’s vote at the end of it with remain as an option.

As always, the most interesting part of the Budget came with the accompanying OBR report. Its projections are based on the most optimistic Brexit scenario envisaged by the British Government, and, basically, it envisages no change in its growth forecasts. Indeed, page 9 of the OBR report shows the UK’s projected economic growth at the bottom of the advanced economies of the world. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its green budget, emphasised the decoupling that we have seen between the British economy and the other advanced economies of the world since the 2016 referendum. Growth is now at around half of pre-recession levels, and that is as a result of eight years of austerity, which has permanently sucked out demand from the economy, and now the Chancellor faces Brexit, all of which lead to anaemic levels of business investment.

The British Government are trying desperately to pivot away from their austerity narrative. They know now, in the new climate, that that is a political vote loser. However, yesterday’s spending commitments fell far short. The IFS puts the price of ending austerity at £19 billion per annum by 2022-23, and the Resolution Foundation puts it at about £30 billion. Yesterday’s spending commitments did not match those sorts of sums. Once extra spending on the national health service in England is stripped out, most other Departments faced a flattening budget, if lucky, or real-terms cuts. We will have to wait for next year’s comprehensive spending review to have a full picture. I look forward to that fiscal event next year. Public expenditure as a percentage of GDP is now basically at the levels seen at the end of the Thatcher years—about 38%. Austerity has enabled the GDP is now basically at the levels seen at the end of the Thatcher years—about 38%. Austerity has enabled the

...
I was disappointed that, despite numerous debates and questions on the cancer strategy, the Chancellor did not mention any further funding for advanced radiotherapy. He said in the statement:

"we agreed that the NHS would produce a 10-year plan, setting out how the service will reform, how waste will be reduced, and exactly what the British people can expect to get"—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 656.]

I declare an interest, as a cancer survivor who was successfully treated with both chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I am also now a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy.

I am not alone in having benefited from radiotherapy. About one in four people receive some form of radiotherapy during their lives, and almost half of us will be diagnosed with cancer in the UK at some point in our lifetime. Those stark facts will, I hope, remind the Government how important it is that we invest in modern and accessible cancer treatments. Delivering the recommendations set out in the cancer strategy is crucial to improving care and support for thousands of people affected by cancer. I like to participate in the knockabout and the political point scoring as much as anyone, as Members probably know, but I am not trying to make a party political point about the nature of this policy. I am simply trying to emphasise that it requires resources, a plan, a strategy and commitment.

I have regularly raised advanced radiotherapy and its benefits and have advocated further investment in research into it. Given the cost, investment and research should be evidence-based, but there are some very exciting areas. I went to see the new proton beam therapy machine at the Rutherford Cancer Centre in Northumberland, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). I saw the installation of a proton beam therapy bunker and the advanced equipment there, as well as stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy, or SABR; adaptive radiotherapy based on advanced imaging, which is a form of magnetic resonance imaging combined with a linear accelerator; combinations of radiotherapy and new drugs; biomarkers, so that radiotherapy can precisely target cancer cells; and molecular radiotherapy.

I also recently visited the Elekta facility in the constituency of the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), in the company of my fellow vice-chair of the APPG on radiotherapy, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), and Professor Patricia Price from the Royal Marsden Hospital. We saw these machines being built and developed. This is very impressive technology and it is being developed here in the United Kingdom.

Not only does SABR treat cancers that conventional therapy cannot but the advanced nature of the treatment is such that patients need only be irradiated four or five times, rather than 20, as was the case with conventional radiotherapy. It is not only more effective, but it would save our cancer centres money. More importantly, it can dramatically reduce the number of times that patients are exposed to radiation while still destroying the cancerous tumours.

Although it is needed in over 50% of cases, access to radiotherapy in England is patchy, varying from 25% to 49% depending on the region, with the average being around 38%. Ideally, according to research by Cancer Research UK, patients should have to travel no more than 45 minutes to access this form of treatment, and considerable investment is going to be needed to achieve that. Only 5% of the NHS cancer budget is currently spent on radiotherapy—5% of the cancer budget, not of the total NHS budget—which is £383 billion. More investment is needed to increase access to modern radiotherapy because that will increase cancer survival.

I encourage all Members of the House and Ministers to read the “Manifesto for Radiotherapy”, which highlights the importance, and the important benefits, of increasing the percentage of spend on radiotherapy. Increasing it quite modestly—from 5% currently to 6.5% of the cancer budget—would secure a world-class radiotherapy service. Let us not forget that one of the justifications for the huge health and social care reforms put forward by the Government was the poor cancer survival rates. Currently, our cancer survival rates are the second worst in Europe, so there is a deal of work to do.

I suggest that investment in radiotherapy would not only enable treatment of large numbers of cancer patients, save lives and achieve better outcomes but bring positive economic benefits. I commend it to the Minister for Health and urge him to look at it as part of the cancer strategy.

5.56 pm

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): An end to austerity cannot come soon enough. It is disappointing that the Chancellor chose yesterday just to kick the can down the road, and that he has committed only to starting to end austerity—maybe—in a spending review next year. Families and children in my constituency cannot wait until then; they have waited long enough.

The Chancellor says that this is a Budget for hard-working families. I take issue with that term because we should not judge people on such a basis. Many families cannot work because of their circumstances and feel stigmatised by the “strivers and skivers” narrative that the Government continue to use. However, universal credit means the disgraceful reality that many families are actually in work but still facing poverty. Cuts to universal credit mean that they will not be able to work themselves out of that poverty trap.

That situation is compounded by the Chancellor’s pretendy living wage, which leaves 16 and 17-year-olds facing an increasing age pay gap. In 2017, the gap between the pretend minimum wage and the rate for 16 and 17-year-olds was £3.45 and this year it was £3.63. Next year their rate will ≤3.86 less, but 16 and 17-year-olds will still have the same bills to pay. They can be in the same job and doing the same task as somebody on the higher rate, but this Government do not value their labour, which is an absolute disgrace.

The reality is that the UK Government’s cuts will see welfare spending in Scotland cut by 3.7 billion. The Scottish Government are trying really hard and making changes to make the system fairer in the limited way we can, but we are working with one hand tied behind our back.

My constituency voted for independence in 2014 and to stay in the EU in 2016. We did not vote for austerity, and we did not vote for the choices this Tory Government are inflicting on us. This Government are doing nothing to convince these voters that their vote in 2016 was wrong. Acknowledging that austerity should be over, but taking no action to end it is a disappointing move
for even the most hardened of cynics, and the possibility of crashing out of the EU without a deal fair focuses the mind.

Economic policy is not just about adding pennies here and there on fuel and alcohol but about the building blocks of what we want our society to look like. Austerity embeds inequality — that is no safety net for people who find themselves on hard times, and people feel punished for being disabled — and this is no way to build a fairer society. The UK Government also fail to acknowledge that austerity is gendered and discriminatory at its very core. The Government should be looking at inclusive growth policies to increase wages and to engage women in the labour market, but they are not doing so.

Women are more likely to claim benefits. This is not because they are lazy or workshy, as the “strivers and skivers” narrative would have us believe, but because a societal expectation still exists that women will look after the children, the elderly and the sick. Even now, the majority of unpaid labour is almost always performed by women. When benefits are cut, it is frequently women who will go hungry to make sure their children are fed. Women also go into low-paid and part-time work to meet their caring obligations.

What did the Government do? They cut and they cut and they cut. We have seen huge cuts to breastfeeding support across England. I mention that because it leaves women with very little choice. If they want to breastfeed and do not get support for that, they are forced to buy infant formula, but infant formula has risen in price by 9.6% since the Brexit vote. With real-terms cuts to benefits, where are these women supposed to find the extra money? Healthy Start vouchers have also not kept pace with the increase. On top of that, if the baby happens to be the third child born into a family, that family will now be nearly £3,000 a year worse off because of the two-child cap on universal credit. Something so arbitrary as the order children are born in should not affect their chances in life.

A freeze on fuel duty does not help many working families or those with caring obligations who are still struggling to make ends meet. People on very low incomes often do not own cars — in Glasgow, 51% of households do not have access to a car. Nor are people on very low incomes likely to benefit from an increase in the personal allowance, because they do not earn enough. Two thirds of them are women. What is the Chancellor going to do to help those women?

Some 3,400 women in my constituency are affected by the increases to the state pension age. These women have a contract with the state, and the UK Government are not holding up their end of it. Some parts of my constituency still have a life expectancy that is below average. That is a legacy of previous Tory policies, which forced people into poor life choices. Most people affected by this pension policy will not even live long enough to get the full benefit of their state pension.

The impact of this policy is starting to show in the statistics. The recent annual survey of hours and earnings showed that the gender pay gap for over-60s had increased by nearly 3% in a year. WASPI women are having to postpone their well-deserved retirement and take up low-paid jobs just to keep their heads above water.

Austerity means difficult choices for the lowest earners in our society. People are at risk of getting into debt to feed their families, pay rent or buy Christmas presents for their kids during the five-week wait on universal credit. As I have said in this place before, somebody making a claim in Shettleston jobcentre when universal credit rolls out on 5 December will be without money until 9 January — a cold, lonely Christmas, with no money coming in. The response of the Chancellor and DWP Ministers is to say, “It’s okay. They can get a loan.” People in my constituency do not want more debt; they want fair wages and a high standard of living, and they do not want to be dragged down by this Government’s policies.

Funding for managed migration does not help the people who will be part of the roll-out on 5 December in Calton. These people will miss out if there are any managed migration funds. That is why universal credit must be paused now. I am begging Ministers to look at this, because I do not want children in my constituency going with nothing at Christmas.

Austerity will not be over until the benefit freeze is lifted, the two-child cap is abolished and there is a focus on policies that actually increase wages. Last week I called on the Chancellor to end the benefit freeze. The Tories have rightly received harsh scrutiny over universal credit, but the benefit freeze could be just as damaging to low-income families. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that, by 2020, it will cost families as much as £800 a year.

There is a huge disparity here. The Government have a choice between big businesses, tax cuts and low earners, and their priorities have been made perfectly clear in this Budget, which does nothing for so many people in this country and will put them further in poverty.

6.3 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

I had an amusing conversation with a Conservative MP the other day. He argued that I think he and his Conservative colleagues wake up each morning planning how to make people’s lives more difficult. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I reassured him that I do not actually think that. I actually believe that, at their core, people are fundamentally good. But I also believe that our actions and experiences are shaped by our experiences of the world: what we see, hear and feel informs our understanding and, therefore, what we believe to be right. That is the only generous explanation I can find for why the Chancellor has failed to give our public services, education and local government the sustained and substantially increased funding they desperately need. He has failed to listen and understand why it is needed. Surely if the Chancellor had seen the levels of poverty that I have seen in Hull, he would not be so quick to disregard our requests. My first ask for the Chancellor and the Minister is this: walk a mile in our constituents’ shoes. As I have said in this place before, somebody making a claim in Shettleston jobcentre when universal credit rolls out on 5 December will be without money until 9 January — a cold, lonely Christmas, with no money coming in.

Hull has a higher need than other places, yet has been disproportionately affected by austerity. One child in three lives in poverty in my constituency. My area has
more children than average with special educational needs and disabilities, yet the budget for Hull has been cut by a third compared with the national average of just over a quarter. Only one unitary authority has been hit harder than Hull. But those are just numbers, and numbers do not explain the very human cost and the very human stories. Here are just two of my more recent ones.

My constituent Steve is disabled with an advanced case of multiple sclerosis. His care bills rose from £50 to £86 a week because of the cuts. He could not afford to pay them and ended up being chased by East Riding of Yorkshire Council for the money he was unable to pay, which caused him extreme distress and upset.

Diane is 60. She has been affected by the changes to state pension rules for women. She was recently refused a benefits award because apparently she is not poor enough. She has been working for 42 years—since she was 16. She wrote me an email saying that she was a proud woman who did not want to be asking other people for help, but that she could not afford to buy new glasses because she did not have enough money.

Put simply, because of the cuts, people in our country are not getting the support that they need and the support they have worked their whole lives for and deserve. The consequences of austerity are being felt up and down the country. Public services are being stretched to breaking point. The tough choices we hear people speak about are easy to say here in this environment, while we are in our cosy lives going back to our warm beds. It seems that tough choices are only tough for the very poorest in society.

Public services are a good thing. Funding them is the right thing to do, because that gives everybody, or tries to give everybody, the same chances in life. My life has been shaped for the better because of the public services I have used: from the NHS who helped to deliver my youngest, the health visitor, Ann, who came to help me in those first weeks, which are terrifying as a new parent; and from my teachers in my local comprehensive that offered me so much support with my youngest. I could go on. My life experiences—what I see, hear and feel—have been made better by the public services that support me here today demanding that those services are saved.

Public services are not like private care. They are not just about benefiting me; good public services benefit everybody. The Budget so deeply patronised and angered our parents, teachers and governors in mainstream schools with the promise of a “little extra”. Many schools are sending out begging letters to parents asking for funding for basic supplies. Done right, investment in public services can save money in the long run, for example by enabling children to stay at school and preventing off-roll exclusions through investment in pastoral care and family support.

I have significant and deep concerns about how our vulnerable children can be exploited. I fear for their future. Today, Barnardo’s issued a statement saying that our excluded children are at risk of being groomed and exploited by criminal gangs. Those children might not have had to be excluded if the schools had the money for the pastoral care and support they needed, and if our social workers had the money for early intervention and family support. There is no mystery to why the number of exclusions has increased along with austerity. As I tell my children, actions have consequences. In this case, the Government’s inaction has a consequence.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report that asked, “Is Britain Fairer?”, and I will quote from the executive summary. It said:

“Disabled people are...more likely to be in poverty... They...face poorer health and lack of access to suitable housing.”

It said that “Child poverty has increased” and that infant mortality has risen “for the first time in decades.” It said that tax and welfare reforms continue to have a “disproportionate impact on the poorest in society” as well as on some ethnic minorities, women and disabled people, and that the reforms are “weakening the safety net” for “those unable to work, or stuck in low-paid or precarious work.”

It said:

“Homelessness is also on the rise”.

In society, in government and in Parliament, we reap what we sow. There are huge consequences of pushing a policy that leaves people behind for not only the people themselves, but society more widely. Where austerity is being pushed the hardest—in cities such as Hull—the consequences will be even worse. It is time for the Chancellor to think again. The cost of austerity is simply too high.

6.10 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who made an excellent speech.

We have had the usual smoke and mirrors about the real money that is going into the NHS through this Budget, but I think that everybody outside the Chamber agrees that it is not enough to meet the increase in demand that we all know about. Equally as concerning, however, is the fact that the percentage of the NHS budget that will be part of public spending over the forthcoming years will rise to roughly one third of overall spending. That says an awful lot about what we are not spending money on, as well as what we are spending.

Sometime soon, we will have the 10-year plan. The taxpayers, whom the Secretary of State was so concerned about earlier, will have absolutely no say in that plan, the priorities or how the resources are allocated. It is a completely missed opportunity to treat the public as grown-ups in the debate about health funding so that they are clear about the cost of health services, the extent of spending and the quality that money can buy, and understand what they are prepared to pay for.

Let me speak briefly about VAT. Page 50 of the Red Book refers to some tinkering around the edges of VAT, but the Government make no mention of closing the loophole that has been exploited by some NHS trusts. I visited a Treasury Minister recently to talk about wholly owned companies saving VAT. The Treasury seems unconcerned about the loss of income from VAT on wholly owned companies, and the Department of Health and Social Care seems totally unconcerned about the competing fragmentation of our services. It would be really good if both Departments had a chat with each other, decided what the policy should be and sorted it out.
I want to concentrate now on the Budget. Bristol is a city of high employment, and also a city with high rates of ill health and disability. The greatest inequalities are in my constituency, with people living on average for 19 years in ill health. The Marmot review on health inequalities estimated that between £36 billion and £40 billion are lost in taxes, welfare payments and costs to the NHS through health inequalities. This is a huge opportunity for us to do better.

I want to touch on universal credit and social care. Some 5,900 of my constituents currently claim employment and support allowance and the Government intend, at some point, to migrate them on to universal credit. In successfully claiming ESA, my constituents have been subject to the work capability assessment. Many have been initially refused, but then have successfully appealed that decision on one or more occasion. They will have proved to the Department for Work and Pensions that their long-term disability or ill health means that they cannot work and need financial support. There is still no recognition or understanding that these constituents will never work again. They do not need incentives or sanctions to work. The DWP agrees that they cannot work, but universal credit offers them no benefit, only a loss of income. Surely it is time to halt the migration of anyone currently claiming ESA and allow new claimants with an illness or disability to claim that benefit. We need a proper rethink about how we support those who most need our help.

The problem on social care is well documented. We know how many people are losing support, but it is still a silent misery for thousands of families, because until someone goes into the system, they do not understand how bad it is. The King’s Fund said that public awareness of the system is very poor and that “As long as the public view the issue from behind a veil of ignorance, it is easier for national politicians to trade on...rivals’ proposals.”

I do not want to trade on fear and misinformation; I want us to set a path for what we need. I would like the Budget to have helped, but it has not. The language needs to change. Spending on social care is not a drain, a time bomb, a burden or a threat to assets. It is an investment in people and in our future. Every business, every public service and every family is struggling to cope with social care, and investing in it is an infrastructure issue. It is essential to our prosperity.

The cycle of ill health, disability and poverty is well known, as is the problem of low productivity, and poor educational attainment does not help. Last month, one of my colleges came up with the Love Our Colleges campaign to talk about underfunding in further education and the need to bridge the skills gap. College funding has been cut by 30% since 2009 at the same time as costs have increased dramatically, including for pensions. At the same time, however, the number of adult courses has dropped by 62% and the number of health and social care courses by 68%. How can that be a priority when there is that level of disinvestment? This is a huge problem in Bristol South because we do not send youngsters to higher education—further education is the driver of prosperity for our people.

As I highlighted earlier, also not mentioned was the OECD report on early years education. There was nothing in the Budget about this, despite evidence that early years education is a driver of prosperity. Nursery schools, which are under the control of local authorities, were forgotten even in the Chancellor’s miserly throwaway comment. He has not given them anything. They do not even get the pittance he threw away in the Budget.

Finally, I want to say something about our police services. Some 75% of recorded incidents are currently non-crime and include missing persons reports and issues relating to people experiencing mental health crises, all of which are highly resource intensive. I am currently on the parliamentary police force scheme and spending a lot of time with our police force, so I have seen this at first hand. The police funding formula has not been updated for a decade and does not reflect current demand. The police and crime commissioner has been clear about this. In Avon and Somerset, we have a very good system for analysing demand and the associated resource needs, but we are still not getting the money, even though we have proved we need the resource.

In conclusion, the Government are ignoring all the data and evidence, and not linking up their policies in order to deliver the improved productivity that this country needs and which will drive prosperity for all our constituents.

6.16 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). Yesterday, the Chancellor made his Budget speech and told us that the era of austerity was nearly over, that schools would be getting money for the “little extras” and that all would be rosy as he increased tax thresholds, but that it would all be off if there was a no-deal Brexit.

The Budget was telling for another reason, though: the areas that it did not mention. There was no mention of funding for policing. We have lost more than 21,000 police officers since 2010. The Home Affairs Committee, in its recent report, “Policing for the Future”, said: “Without additional funding for policing...there will be dire consequences for public safety, criminal justice, community cohesion and public confidence.”

The report also told of recorded crime having risen by 32% in the past three years and of the number of charges and summons having decreased by 26%. Why are the Government not concerned about public safety and fighting crime?

There was also no mention of extra funding for local authorities. The Chancellor said that austerity was nearly over. Why, then, does my borough of Enfield, which has had to find £161 million of cuts since 2010, still need to find an extra £31 million? Local councils are embedded in their communities and perform many vital roles—they do not just fill in potholes. Why was there no extra money for youth services, social care and local authority CAMHS to meet the needs of children at school? We know what the Government think about local authorities. Rather than supporting councils, they let councils such as Northampton go bust. They should be ashamed of the way they are destroying local councils, which are at breaking point, and slashing their funding. It is death by a billion cuts.

On education, the Chancellor made mention of additional funding for schools to pay for the “little extras”, as he described them. I wonder whether he has
spoken to any headteachers, staff, governors or parents. Many schools in my constituency are facing huge cuts in the hundreds of thousands of pounds to teaching assistants, support services for children, school trips and non-curriculum subjects. The Chancellor is delusional if he thinks that £10,000 for “little extras” will go any way towards stemming the tide of cuts to schools. Those cuts are real, and they are having a detrimental effect on children. I have nothing but respect for the headteachers, staff, governors and parents who are trying to keep things together for their schools. What an insult to provide more money for potholes than for schools—the Chancellor could not have been more patronising if he tried.

On universal credit, the £1.7 billion the Chancellor announced to fix the failing system is a fraction of what his predecessor took out of it. What would he say to a local resident I spoke to who is a single mother—not through her own choice—working part time, who will be £50 a week worse off as she migrates from tax credits to universal credit? Why is he not putting money in to make sure that no one is worse off under universal credit? Why are people who are being migrated to universal credit not being protected? The legacy of the Government’s austerity is the prevalence of food banks, homelessness and poverty across the country.

The Ministry of Justice has had its budget cut year on year. The cost of processing women in the criminal justice system is £1.7 billion a year. One of the most successful ways of stopping reoffending is to provide support in women’s centres, yet they have been cut and do not receive the funding they need, leaving many in a precarious situation. Women’s centres have been picking up the pieces from the failing privatised rehabilitation centres, which have been rewarded for their failure.

There is nothing in the Budget for legal aid, which means that people will not get the representation they need and that there will be more injustices. Having proper representation in criminal proceedings is becoming the preserve of the rich. The Government seem totally uninterested in support for the criminal justice system and content to allow injustices to continue.

The Chancellor may think that the era of austerity is over, but it is not over for schools, for councils, for people on universal credit, for the homeless, for those caught up in the criminal justice system or for victims of crime, and certainly not for those who are poor. This Budget is a façade; it does not stand up to scrutiny, and it could all be scrapped by Christmas.

6.22 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): After the Government have been taken to court and lost three times over air quality, and following the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report stating that we have just 12 years to avert climate change catastrophe, I expected this Budget to deliver the investment we need in clean, green infrastructure for our lungs and our planet. In a quest to bring down costs, the Chancellor has not looked to capitalise on the opportunities that a modern, green economy would bring to the UK. Instead, he has focused on miserly cost-cutting measures. This is a Budget of abject complacency in the face of climate catastrophe. As usual, the Government’s obsession with low-cost public services and their lack of any serious investment have left our environment, the water we drink and the air we breathe off the agenda.

Not only are we on track to miss our air pollution targets, but the Government have lost three court cases and had their policy on air quality ruled unlawful. It has been left to local councils, which have been subject to extreme funding cuts, to deliver change in this area. Where is the commitment to clean air? Air quality affects our health and the health of our children and grandchildren. A recent study linked air pollution to more than 40,000 early deaths in the UK—that is 40,000 people dying before their time because the air they breathe in the fifth richest country in the world fails the required standard.

This is a public health nightmare. The Government have left our national health service strapped for cash as it is. Public Health England has estimated that air pollution costs could rise to £18.6 billion by 2025. If we do nothing and the quality of our air does not improve, there could be 2.5 million new cases of air quality-related illnesses such as lung cancer, asthma and heart disease by 2035. It is not cost-effective to ignore this problem; it is short-sighted austerity politics yet again.

The UK needs to lead the fight for cleaner air and carbon reduction. To do that, we need to incentivise a just transition for health, jobs and the environment. Why, then, has the Chancellor cut subsidies for plug-in hybrid and electric vehicles? How does he expect British drivers to make the switch from petrol and diesel cars if they are not encouraged to do so? Why does a Nissan Leaf have the same VAT rate as a Hummer? Should clean cars not be VAT-exempt? Where is the investment in the electric vehicle infrastructure that we so desperately need? In my constituency there is not a single public charge point; this is fourth time I have raised this issue in the House, and there are still no charge points. There are very few rapid charge points on British motorways, too. That does not build confidence in the new technology, and it leaves EV drivers with charge anxiety. There is no point in encouraging people to buy electric or hybrid vehicles if we do not provide the necessary infrastructure. The Government must do their bit. We need charge points in every community, rapid charge points across our road network and real investment in EV infrastructure and affordability.

Further, we need proper investment in northern heavy rail infrastructure to ensure that people have an alternative to using their cars. Clean rail is lacking in my constituency, where the Harrogate line is still running dirty diesel as the Government first promised then scrapped the electrification programme—a shameful example of this Government’s craven disregard for the north of England.

I recently submitted my consultation response on the plan to scrap feed-in tariffs. This incredibly short-sighted plan will end a scheme that has been successful in encouraging communities, councils and individuals to take ownership of their energy and carbon footprint. While the Government cite increased energy bills to justify their position, they have no plan to replace the scheme with anything other than business as usual for the big six energy companies, which they have conveniently left out of their analysis of consumer energy bills. Where is the investment in proper insulation of UK homes to reduce energy consumption and take so many people out of the fuel poverty they are suffering? All this, and we are still on course to miss our next carbon budget target. When will the Government wake up and realise that we are in the midst of an environmental and
public health crisis, and take the necessary action to change course at international, national and community level?

Of course, this debate is about the Budget and health. We have a health service in which our Government’s health economics put the interests of the private sector above those of the public. NHS trusts, including my own, have set up wholly owned subsidiary companies so that private companies can reclaim VAT. In Leeds it is just a service company, but many other trusts have set up wholly owned subsidiary companies that have transferred thousands of NHS staff into the private sector. The solution I had hoped to hear from the Chancellor was that he would put our hard-working public servants on an equal footing and allow the NHS to reclaim VAT in just the same way as those private companies do. But we have a Chancellor who finds a way to put the private sector ahead of our hard-working hospital porters, have a Chancellor who finds a way to put the private

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In short, this Budget has come up short, put the interests of the few ahead of those of the many and put the planet on notice from which it might never recover.

6.27 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I preface my remarks by briefly mentioning the awful tragedy that took place at Leicester City football club in my Leicester constituency this weekend? My city—the city I represent—is grieving. We have lost a much loved friend who enjoyed the respect, affection and admiration of not just Leicester City football fans but everyone across our city. Our condolences go out to the loved ones of all who lost their lives in that terrible helicopter crash, and again I pay my tribute to our extraordinary emergency services—the police, the fire and rescue services, the NHS and all other staff—for their quick response, their dedication and their professionalism.

This was supposed to be the Budget that ended austerity, but instead, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor outlined, we have more of the same. Cuts to public services will continue. Poverty will increase. The very poorest households in society will lose out. Austerity has not ended; we know austerity has not ended because that is the headline in George Osborne’s Evening Standard this evening.

Members have spoken in this debate with great passion, and I am sure the House will forgive me if I cannot mention each and every one of them, but some did catch my attention. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) began the debate with a tour de force and reminded the House that PFI was a Tory policy begun by—[Interruption.] Conservative Members are chuntering. Perhaps they should have a word with the International Trade Secretary who from this Dispatch Box used to urge us to pursue PFI because it was “exclusively to fund private capital projects”—[Official Report, 8 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 181.]

Perhaps they should have a word with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who used to give a “warm welcome” to PFI. Perhaps they should have a word with the former Brexit Secretary; I know he is on the Back Benches now, but he used to say in this House:

“The PFI has many virtues—after all, it was a Conservative policy in the first instance.”—[Official Report, 10 March 1999; Vol. 327, c. 429.]

Perhaps they should have a word with the Business Secretary, who said:

“PFI was initiated by the previous Conservative Government.”—[Official Report, 12 February 2013; Vol. 558, c. 787.]

Perhaps they should also have a word with the Scottish Secretary, who said that PFI was a “successful basis for funding”, or with the Welsh Secretary, who said:

“I am a fan of PFI in general.”—[Official Report, 4 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 1124.]

We will take no lessons on PFI from the Tories.

We have heard other welcome contributions to the debate today. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who is no longer in his place, spoke eloquently about the need for investment in radiotherapy and cancer treatments. It was a very constructive speech and I saw the Health Minister on the Front Bench nodding at the time; he has obviously had to leave the debate now. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean)—I do not know whether she is still here—mentioned the importance of more investment in and recognition of the menopause. I entirely agree with her on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) talked about the terrible and devastating consequences of gambling addiction. As someone who has spoken out about how addiction has taken a devastating toll on my own family, I completely endorse what my hon. Friend said today. The Government really need to push ahead with changes to fixed-odds betting terminals. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and others talked about health inequalities and how the advances in life expectancy were beginning to stall for the first time in 100 years, and were indeed going backwards in some of the poorest parts of our country. This should shame us as a society, and I endorse the calls for an inquiry. If we had a Labour Government, we would have a specific target for narrowing health inequalities.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke eloquently about the effects of the Budget on children. I commend all her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding. It is shameful in our society that, as we saw on Channel 4’s “Dispatches” last night, one in 100 families are now turning to baby banks in our constituencies for access to baby clothing, food and toys. That is absolutely disgraceful. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) complained about chuntering from our side as he spoke about the importance of marriage. I agree that marriage is an immensely important institution, but I say to him that children should take priority in social policy and that the Government should be investing in children regardless of the marital status of their parents.

I hope that Members will forgive me if I do not mention everyone, but I did enjoy the passionate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on the value of public services. At one point, she said, “This is my truth.” I do not know whether she was referring to the Manic Street Preachers or to Aneurin Bevan, who also said:

“This is my truth, tell me yours.”
My hon. Friend’s speech was a superb successor contribution to some of the speeches that Bevan would have made from the Dispatch Box when he created the NHS and the Conservatives voted against its creation.

The Health Secretary does not seem to be in this place to hear the wind-ups, but I am sure that he is on his way. I am told that he is a fan of horse-racing, but I am afraid that his speech fell at the first hurdle day. You see, Mr Speaker, it is not just the Chancellor who can do rubbish jokes in the Chamber. The Health Secretary forgot to tell us what eight years of austerity had delivered for the national health service and what eight years of the deepest and longest financial squeeze in the NHS’s history had delivered. We now have 4.3 million people on the waiting list and 2.8 million people waiting for more than four hours in A&E, of whom more than 600,000 are designated as trolley waits. Over 25,000 people are waiting beyond two months for cancer treatment, which is twice the number in 2010.

Winters are now so bad in the NHS than they were branded a “humanitarian crisis” by the Red Cross. Last winter, 186,000 patients were trapped in the back of cold ambulances and not even able to be admitted to an overcrowded hospital. Hip replacements, knee replacements, cataract treatments and rounds of IVF are being rationed and restricted. There were 84,000 cancelled operations in the past year, including nearly 19,000 cancellations of children’s operations for broken bones, for the removal of rotten teeth, for eye surgery and even for cancer.

Nowhere is the disgraceful neglect of children in our health service more prevalent than in mental health services. Three in four children with a diagnosable mental health condition do not get access to the support they need. The numbers of young people attending A&E with a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition have trebled in the past eight years. A fifth of children and young people referred for an eating disorder wait more than four weeks for treatment, while more than 1,000 children are sent far from home—sometimes more than 100 miles away—for in-patient care. That is what happens after eight years of cuts, closures, privatisation and failure to invest in staffing. That is what austerity has done, and it will continue.

One really must examine the small print of the spending readjustments for the NHS. The Health Secretary talked about £20 billion extra for the NHS over five years, but there is no new money for the winter ahead, which hospital bosses are already warning will be even tougher than last year’s. According to Ministers, the NHS budget is set to grow by 3.6% next year. If the shadow Chancellor were Chancellor, it would grow by 5% next year.

Let us look at what is not included in the health budget, which the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who chairs the Health Committee, and others alluded to. First, even though the Health Secretary tells us staffing is his priority, we have 107,000 vacancies across the NHS. We are short of 40,000 nurses and midwives staff and of 10,000 doctors. The number of GPs is down by at least 1,700 pieces of outdated and often faulty equipment, yet capital budgets are excluded from the 3.6% allocation. In fact, according to the Red Book, capital will be cut by £500 million. The Chancellor boasted that he was ending PFI—I do not why he thought that would embarrass the shadow Chancellor or the Leader of the Opposition; he has obviously not followed the history of the Labour party in recent years—but the Government’s response to the Naylor report on infrastructure needs for primary care signalled that £3 billion would be raised from private finance investment. If PFI is abolished, where will that £3 billion for primary care transformation come from? Or is the reality that the Chancellor has not abolished private financing of public capital projects, but has simply abolished an acronym?

Secondly, the Health Secretary promised us a “technological revolution”. Our NHS faces a £6 billion repair backlog, relies on 12,000 fax machines and uses at least 1,700 pieces of outdated and often faulty equipment, yet capital budgets are excluded from the 3.6% allocation. In fact, according to the Red Book, capital will be cut by £500 million. The Chancellor boasted that he was ending PFI—I do not why he thought that would embarrass the shadow Chancellor or the Leader of the Opposition; he has obviously not followed the history of the Labour party in recent years—but the Government’s response to the Naylor report on infrastructure needs for primary care signalled that £3 billion would be raised from private finance investment. If PFI is abolished, where will that £3 billion for primary care transformation come from? Or is the reality that the Chancellor has not abolished private financing of public capital projects, but has simply abolished an acronym?

Thirdly, despite the Health Secretary’s hollow commitment to prevention, public health services are still being cut. We have seen £700 million of cuts so far, with another £96 million to come. For example, substance misuse services in our constituencies will be cut by £34 million next year at a time when we have some of the highest drug deaths and alcohol-related hospital admissions on record. Sexually transmitted infections are on the increase, yet sexual health services are set to be cut by £17.6 million next year. We are falling behind internationally on children’s health outcomes, from obesity to immunisations and support for new mums with breastfeeding, and the numbers of health visitors and school nurses are falling, yet early years health services will be cut next year because of cuts to the public health grant. Those cuts should have been reversed in the Budget, not endorsed.

Taken together, there will be £1 billion of cuts to public health, training and capital, which means this health settlement represents an increase next year not of 3.6% but of 2.7%. That is not enough to deliver the level of service that patients expect.

Let us look at what the £20 billion will fund. We have been told there is £2 billion extra for mental health, but growing mental health spending in line with the increase in overall health spending costs an extra £2 billion. That is more spin and smoke and mirrors. The Institute for Public Policy Research says we need £4 billion extra. NHS England advises us that NHS activity increases by 3.1% a year. Demand is rising, the burden of chronic disease is rising and the number of patients with multiple chronic conditions using the NHS is increasing. Those demographic changes and the rising burden of disease will take up £16 billion of that £20 billion. The pay increase, which the Government have been forced into because of campaigning of staff, the trade unions and the Labour party, will take up another £3.5 billion. That is £19.5 billion of the £20 billion already taken up—and still no plan to reduce waiting lists, tackle the A&E crisis, invest in general practice, or deal with the £4.3 billion of underlying deficits of hospitals and loans owed by NHS trusts.

The Chancellor’s answer in the Red Book is to say that we should have 1% efficiencies a year in the NHS. What does that mean more cuts and greater rationing of treatments. In the Red Book, the Chancellor also says that we can create savings through prevention—even though he is cutting prevention budgets—and
integration of care. How can we integrate care with the health sector when billions of pounds have been cut from social care? Some £7 billion has been cut from social care, so 400,000 people now go without care support and over 50,000 over-65s with dementia are admitted to hospital because of a lack of social care.

The Chancellor said yesterday that he is giving more to social care, but he is cutting local authority budgets by £1.3 billion with one hand and is offering councils £650 million to be shared between adult and children’s social care with the other. He is literally asking councils to choose between supporting vulnerable children with social care and supporting vulnerable adults with social care. That is not a serious choice; it is callous, cruel, nasty politics. We need a comprehensive settlement for social care, not the ongoing short-term drips from this Government.

We need a plan for the NHS. Yesterday was an opportunity to turn around our greatest institution, but it is not enough to deal with waiting lists or the crisis in recruiting the staff we need. There is no plan to bring waiting lists down and end rationing of treatment, no plan to recruit the doctors and nurses needed for the future, no plan to reverse the cuts to children’s health services and end privatisation, no plan to rebuild social care and improve care for those living with dementia, no plan to expand community health services and general practice, and no plan to transform services for the future. The record will show, yet again, that you simply cannot trust the Tories with the NHS.

6.42 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):

May I begin by associating myself and Government Members with the pertinent comments made by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) in respect of the terrible tragedy that has befallen Leicester City football club in his constituency?

In 2010, we inherited an economy in disarray. It has been the discipline of a Conservative Government that has brought that back on track, combined with a monumental national effort on the part of millions of determined people in our country. Together we have turned the economy around. We now have near record levels of employment and near record levels of women in employment. Unemployment is at its lowest level since 1975, and we have halved youth unemployment since 2010. Debt is falling, and of course the deficit has been reduced by no less than 80%. Those points were all quite rightly made by my hon. Friends the Members for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan).

In yesterday’s Budget, we showed the British people that their hard work has paid off, because the people of this country now deserve the rewards that are available in our strengthened economy. This Budget is a demonstration that we are coming out of austerity and into a brighter future. Today we have had a full and thoughtful debate on health and public services, and this Budget provides significant additional investment in our precious national health service, our carers, our schools and our police—those serving on the frontline, helping and caring for our families and communities, and working to build a better, safer and healthier Britain.

This Government have ensured an increase in NHS funding every year since 2010, including a pay rise for more than 1 million workers. We took this commitment still further in the Budget, delivering on the Prime Minister’s announcement in June of the largest single public services cash commitment ever made by a peacetime Government—the biggest cash boost to the national health service in its history. Of course, it is essential that every pound of that money is spent wisely so that the national health service is put on a more sustainable footing, and we look forward to Simon Stevens’s 10-year plan setting out exactly what the British people can expect to see.

The Chancellor announced yesterday that within the NHS settlement we will provide a significant uplift in funding for mental health, to the tune of at least £2 billion a year by 2023-24. We are committed to record levels of spending on this vital area, and the NHS plan will include up to £250 million a year by 2023-24 to support people living with poor mental health. It is time to address the stigma and the suffering of those affected by mental health issues and to work towards achieving parity of esteem between mental and physical health. Mental ill health is a pressing need to be addressed, and yesterday’s Budget committed to doing precisely that.

Alongside our NHS settlement, the Budget’s commitment to social care will give a much needed boost to councils, families and patients. The Government will provide £240 million in 2018-19 and a further £650 million next year for local authorities. This money will help people leave hospital when they are able, freeing up hospital beds. All of this builds on the additional £2 billion set aside in last year’s spring Budget for councils to spend on adult care services.

Along with health and social care, a vital pillar of our public services is our world-class education system. Our children deserve the best, so we are already funding schools at record levels—schools will receive over £42 billion of core funding this year—and the results are showing: 86% of schools are now rated good or outstanding, compared with 68% in 2010.

We know that school budgets often do not stretch as far as we would like, so this year’s Budget provides even more support. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a one-off £400 million in-year funding bonus for schools and sixth-form colleges in England, which means that the typical primary school will receive £10,000 and the typical secondary school will receive £50,000. All of this tops up our existing commitment to invest £23 billion in improving, refurbishing and replacing school buildings between 2016 and 2021. This is a Conservative Government committed to giving every child the greatest possible start in life, and we are investing in education to make sure that happens.

This Budget is the start of a new era for our country. After eight hard years of clearing up the mess left to us by the Labour party, we are now in a position to substantially increase our support for our vital public services. We have done that by facing up to the challenges laid before us in 2010. The crippling deficit, the highest in peacetime history, was the fallout from the wanton and reckless profligacy of the Labour party. A party that is always quick to blame, to point, to impugn and, of course, to promise without the inconvenience of having to deliver. A party that now finds itself captured by those who would return us to the dark days of the crash, and far worse. A party utterly incapable of facing up to the serious responsibilities of government.
It is we, this Government, who took the tough choices and did what we always knew to be right—to be responsible even when that was the hard way, not the easy way. Those tough choices were taken not for reasons of ideology but for reasons of compassion. For we knew all along that if we stuck the course, if we kept our nerve, if we could be brave and true to our values, then we could spare the country from the cruel impossibility of the Labour party’s promises, and bring us to a place where better times were in reach.

That is where we are now. The deficit is fading, real wages are rising, better times are returning and there, right at the heart, lie those things we hold most dear: our national health service and our public services. This is a Budget for them, and I commend it to the House.

Ordered. That the debate be now adjourned.—(Michelle Donelan.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PETITION

Business Rates Reform

6.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 1,459 constituents from across York and a further 400 online; 1,859 residents and business owners are calling for a transformation in business rates. Although some progress was made in the Budget, it is absolutely clear that a fundamental reform of business rates is still needed, as some will lose out as a result of yesterday’s Budget.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declarations that the current business rates system is out-of-date, unfair and is undermining the viability of our high streets, our hospitality industry and many small businesses across the UK.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to carry out an urgent review and reform of the Business Rates system to help protect the future of the UK High Street and create a level playing field for all businesses. And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002282]

Local Authority Budget Reductions

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

6.51 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the effects of the reduction in local authority budgets, Mr Speaker. I rise this evening as someone who, both as a Member of Parliament and also now as the Mayor of the Sheffield City Region, works closely with our local authorities. Not only do I get to chair the mayoral combined authority of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield, with the Derbyshire Dales, North East Derbyshire, Chesterfield, Bolsover and Bassetlaw as non-constituent members, but, through the Yorkshire Leaders Board, I get to work closely with all of Yorkshire’s local authority leaders, many of whom will be very well known to the Minister. I can tell the House that the work that those local authorities do is of the highest standard of public service, but for too long the reputations of local authorities have been smeared with accusations of profilioicity; their councillors have been accused of a lack of concern for value for money and their workers have faced accusations of idleness. In my experience, all these allegations are unfounded, and have served only to undermine the important role that local authorities play in our communities and to serve as justification for eight years of budgetary cuts.

Councils and councillors are improving people’s lives, every day. The work that they do is community-led public service at its best. Although austerity has forced them to make difficult choices, councillors have stretched and continue to stretch every pound available. They listen to the communities that they both serve and live in, and they work tirelessly to shield the most vulnerable from the worst of the austerity agenda. Labour councils, in particular, have refused to buy into the narrative that they are simply “managing decline”.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I apologise for missing the first minute of this debate, Mr Speaker. My local authority in Torfaen has been doing precisely that—cushioning the impact of universal credit. Does my hon. Friend agree that one problem is that if austerity continues in the way it is, local councils simply will be left with only the money to fulfil their statutory functions?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is the risk. The stakes in all this are incredibly high.

It is important to make the point that even at the height of austerity, Labour councils’ innovations have seen them deliver new community facilities, form groundbreaking energy networks and use technology to improve social care services.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): If funding continues in the same way, local authorities may not even be able to fulfil their statutory duties. Britain’s adult social care system is deteriorating; the reduction in funding is leading to fewer people getting care. That affects quality and increases pressure on the NHS. Does my hon. Friend agree that local authorities need increased Government funding to place adult social care on a stable and sustainable footing? If things continue like this, we will not even be able to provide the basics in the 21st century.
Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The reality is that councils receive more than 5,000 new claims for adult social care support every single day. The additional funding on offer from the Government is the equivalent of £350 for each new claim. That is significantly less than the cost of a week’s stay in a care home. The announcement of an additional £650 million of grant funding for adult social care is not even half what is actually needed. That only serves to show that the Government are not addressing this massive public policy challenge.

We have seen some examples of innovation by local authorities throughout the country, despite the difficult economic circumstances in which they find themselves. I include among them my own local council, Barnsley, which has established a warm homes campaign that seeks to tackle fuel poverty. Doncaster Council has set up an education and skills commission, with a view to shaping a system that works both for the people of Doncaster and for local businesses. Local authorities are making a difference and giving people in our communities support in difficult and testing times. Their accomplishments are a testament to the hard work of councillors and staff. That should be recognised, not only by the local communities that they serve but by a national Government prepared to trust and empower public servants at the most local level of government.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that things are particularly difficult in two-tier areas such as Gloucestershire, where my local authority, Stroud District Council, lost all its rate support grant? Although we are part of the business rates initiative that the Government have introduced, we are still very much on the back foot and have had to cut back on staff and a lot of local initiatives.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend makes an important point about a common experience right around the country. The reality is that councils are facing a funding crisis. In my area, since 2010, Doncaster and Barnsley councils have both had to make £100 million of cuts; Rotherham has had to make £177 million of cuts; and Sheffield City Council has had to make £390 million of cuts.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour on securing this important debate. On his point about funding cuts, he will know that our local council is doing a fantastic job, despite difficult times, but has he, like me, noticed the number of charities—often small, volunteer-led charities offering bereavement services, youth services or support for victims of domestic violence—that just cannot rely on the previous level of funding so have had to cut back the support that they offer to our local community?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour is absolutely right that the cuts to council funding have a much wider impact on our society. They simply mean that councils do not have the vital match funding that keeps so many worthwhile local organisations going. The reality is that austerity has caused huge damage to communities up and down the UK. It has undermined the way we protect children at risk, disabled adults and vulnerable older people. It has reduced the quantity and the quality of community services, such as street cleaning, libraries and rubbish collection. Reduced funding also means reduced capacity to invest in prevention and, as such, these cuts represent no more than a false economy. If councils are unable to fund sufficient support for older people—

7 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michelle Donelan.)

Dan Jarvis: If councils are unable to fund sufficient support for older people, more of them will end up being admitted to hospital. Less money for children’s services means that our young people will only get by rather than thrive. Failing to invest in public transport stifles economic growth, isolates communities, reduces social mobility and damages our environment. These are just a few examples of an austerity agenda that lacks any form of long-term strategy.

I am proud of the way in which Labour-run councils have dealt with these challenges, even in the face of unfairly distributed funding. The poorest local authorities, which tend to be Labour run, have had their spending cut by £226 per person since 2010, while the richest councils have had their spending cut by only £44 per person. These cuts are not just affecting local residents. Years of pay freezes and below-inflation increases mean that some of our council workers are resorting to food banks, are over-reliant on credit and are asking for financial help from family and friends. Unpaid overtime is now essential to keep services going. Nearly half of our council staff are now thinking about leaving to do something less stressful.

Recent research by my union, Unison, found that 83% of council staff do not think that the quality of services delivered for the public have improved and seven in 10 council employees across South Yorkshire think that local residents are not receiving the help and support that they need. Those are figures that should concern us all.

Following eight years of austerity and some £7 billion of cuts, yesterday’s Budget offered little comfort to our local authorities. Local councils face a funding gap of £7.8 billion by 2025 and are still going to be cut by £1.3 billion next year. Yesterday’s Budget offer of £650 million for the coming year is nowhere near enough to close even the funding gap for social care, let alone address the shortfall in other services.

Once again, local authorities have to make do with short-term fixes. The creation of yet more short-term funding pots is no way to get value for money from public spending. Unless meaningful changes are made, the most vulnerable in our communities will continue to suffer. Central and local government need to work together on the fundamental reform of the way community services are funded. If the era of austerity is truly coming to an end, it needs to feel that way to our local residents.

It seems to me that we live in a time of increasing disenfranchisement and distrust. Across the UK, only 27% think that our system of government is working well and only a similarly small number feel that ordinary people have a big say in decision making. When I look at my home county of Yorkshire, it is easy to
understand why. Government spending is nearly £300 per person lower than the national average; transport infrastructure investment is one 10th of that in the capital; and income is only 80% of the national average. These concerns cannot be addressed by the piecemeal redistribution of income that we saw yesterday. They can be addressed only by redistributing power. The Government should be working to empower communities by devolving decision-making closer to the places that it will affect.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank and congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward. Just yesterday, the Chancellor announced £350 million for the Belfast city deal, which will benefit my constituency of Strangford. My council of Ards and North Down got together with adjoining councils to make this deal a reality. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, where possible, if councils can come together to secure a city or a regional deal, it is a great and a good way of securing extra funding for the local areas? I spoke to him beforehand, and he knew that my question was coming.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention; he makes a very important point. I think back to many of the conversations I had with members of the public during the referendum campaign, many of whom used it as an opportunity to vent their frustration against a political system that they felt had not served them well. If we are going to address those feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, the closer that we can place political decision making to the people who will be affected by those decisions, the better. That is why devolution provides a really important opportunity for the Government to engage with those communities and place not just political power but resources closer to the communities who will be affected by the decisions that are taken.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Does he agree that we are also seeing greater inequality as a result of the way in which devolution is being dished out? Some places are advancing with a devolution deal, yet for Yorkshire, where the local authorities desperately want to advance into devolution, it is apparently being denied.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes a really important point to which I will return in a moment. I am very grateful for her intervention.

I was talking about the redistribution of power and how, together with investment, this will lead both to better public services and to the re-engagement of people in a common sense of community purpose. I believe that devolution does offer the opportunity to do this. Whether it is a mayoral or an assembly model, when we get devolution right, it offers a fairer and more democratic means of governing and delivering—one where working people have a greater say in the choices that affect their lives and a greater stake in the services on which they rely. We can seek to achieve radical transformative change in the communities that we serve only if those communities control their own destinies. That means this Government listening to those communities, and to the leaders they have elected to represent them.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) referred to devolution. Will the Minister say when the local authorities of Yorkshire—I know that he will take a very close interest in these matters, for obvious reasons—will get a response to the recent Yorkshire devolution proposal submitted by me and the council leaders? It is not just a matter of basic courtesy that this happens soon; it is in everybody’s interests—the Government’s and all our local authorities across Yorkshire—to move it forward as quickly as possible.

I said that it was important for the Government to listen to the communities that they are there to serve. Well, I have been listening to what the Government have been saying. I know from ministerial responses to parliamentary questions that I have recently tabled that the Minister’s Department intends to publish what is being referred to as a devolution framework. When will this be published, and what consultation has taken place to underpin it? The Minister is obviously very welcome to say what is going to be in it, although I suspect that he may not wish to take up that opportunity. Whatever is in it, I very much hope that it will be driven by what communities actually want. “One size fits all” will not work in this regard.

If we are to enable the right level of devolution to take place, we need to abandon an economic and political model in which the only hope is for wealth to trickle down and prosperity to ripple out. We must replace it with a three-tier system of government—local, regional and national—giving each tier the powers and resources it needs to make a difference in the communities for which it is responsible. Only if we do this correctly will we put the right people at the heart of decision making, end the status quo whereby so many people have become disenfranchised, and allow communities to overcome the challenges they face and to thrive. Greater funding and stronger powers for our local authorities should be the first stage of that journey—but yesterday’s Budget represented, I am afraid, another missed opportunity.

7.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate. His pride and commitment to his local area is clear. I share his passion for local government and join him in paying tribute to the incredibly important work that our local councillors up and down the country do every single day. As someone who is passionate about local government, I thank him for sharing his knowledge and experiences of his area. It is always important for me to hear from colleagues about their areas and what they feel is happening on the ground.

Before I respond to the hon. Gentleman’s points, I will set out my vision for the role of local government, which consists of three broad areas: first, driving economic growth; secondly, helping the most vulnerable in our society; and, thirdly, building strong communities. I will take those three areas in turn and deal with the questions and points raised by the hon. Gentleman, as well as talking in particular about the area that he has the privilege to represent.

I will start with economics and finances. In this financial year, councils in the Sheffield city region, including Rotherham, Sheffield, Doncaster and Barnsley,
had aggregated core spending power of just over £1 billion. Core spending power is the standard measure of a local authority’s financial resources. It rightly includes money not just from the central Government grant, but from locally raised council tax, the local area’s share of the business rates pot, and specific Government grants for things such as adult social care and the new homes bonus. Core spending power across the Sheffield city region is up every year since 2016, and across the country core spending power will see a real-terms increase in this financial year.

Beyond grants from central Government, driving economic growth is the only sustainable way to ensure the vibrancy of our local communities and to raise the vital money that we need to fund our local public services. Business rates retention is one such opportunity. Indeed, across the Sheffield city region, local authorities will generate around £16 million in additional funds this year as a result of keeping the proceeds from the economic growth that they have helped to create. Next year it is estimated that that figure will increase to £24 million.

That is not the only incentive for local growth, however, as it sits alongside the Government’s other work to support local authorities’ wider ambitions through local growth and devolution deals. For example, £52 million has been invested in a business investment fund, which will unlock direct investment in small and medium-sized enterprises across the Sheffield city region. An additional £3 million has been invested to speed up the delivery of the state-of-the-art Supertram network, which I was delighted to see launched last week by the hon. Gentleman and the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson). Finally, a further £36 million has been invested in the region’s integrated infrastructure plan, opening up new employment sites, delivering new homes and fuelling the growth of the advanced manufacturing innovation district between Sheffield and Rotherham. As evidenced by the devolution deal, which I know the hon. Gentleman is passionate about, and the £30 million a year in incremental funding that will come with that deal, the Government will continue to work hand in hand with the new Mayor to back the Sheffield city region and to drive local economic growth to fund local services.

I turn to my second theme. One of the most undeniably crucial roles that local government continues to play is helping the most vulnerable in our society. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is local authorities that support the elderly, the disabled and our children in need. We owe councils an enormous debt of gratitude for the incredibly important work that they do, and this Government are backing local authorities to carry out those vital duties.

Last year’s Budget provided an additional £2 billion for social care. Just last month, another £240 million was announced for social care winter funding this year, and at yesterday’s Budget, the Chancellor announced that a further £650 million will be provided for care services in the next financial year.

It is not just about money. The increased collaboration that this investment has fuelled between local authorities and the NHS has delivered real benefits on the ground in local communities. I am pleased to say that social care has freed up 949 beds a day since the February 2017 peak, which represents a 39% reduction in social care delayed transfers of care. In the Sheffield city region, Barnsley is among the best performing local authorities in the country, achieving zero social care delayed transfers of care according to the most recently available statistics. I pay tribute to the local authority, and others in places such as Doncaster and Sheffield, for their terrific work in this regard.

The Government’s troubled families programme is another area in which we are making amazing strides to support our society’s most vulnerable families. Indeed in Barnsley, the safer neighbourhood service and the early start, prevention and sufficiency service are bringing together council services—including family centres, targeted youth support, education and the youth offending service—to improve outcomes for local residents. We have heard about the importance of prevention, and indeed across the Sheffield city region the troubled families programme is working with over 13,000 families and benefiting from the more than £25 million of available funding.

One of the unique privileges I have as the Local Government Minister is to travel around the country to talk to families participating in this programme and to see at first hand its life-changing work. I am proud to say that £1 billion of funding has been committed to the troubled families programme over this spending cycle. Nationally, more than 130,000 families are already achieving significant and sustained progress. For example, for families on the programme six to 12 months after the intervention, the proportion of children designated as children in need has decreased by 14% compared with the period just before the start of the intervention. In almost 17,000 of these families, one or more adults had succeeded in moving into continuous employment. The programme has ensured that work, and the transformative effects that it can bring to a whole family, is never off the table.

Finally, we can all see that local authorities’ work in building strong communities that thrive and move forward together is beneficial not just to them, but to wider society as well. This work, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, is absolutely vital. Strong communities are cohesive. It is with that in mind that the Government have announced a £19 million fund to help to ease pressures on local services resulting from recent migration. The fund has already committed £484,000 to Barnsley Council, partly to support activities to understand communities’ concerns and to help to address them.

Strong communities need to be connected. The roads that our constituents travel on every day form a key part of our daily experiences. That was why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced yesterday that £420 million will be made available this year for local authorities to fix potholes and carry out other road repairs, which will ensure safer and better roads across our communities. Strong communities also need vibrant high streets to bring us together and to ensure that our towns have beating hearts. That is why the Government have just announced a £675 million fund to support high streets, which local authorities will take the lead in developing.

Lastly, strong communities nurture and celebrate their open green spaces—providing sanctuary from the busy world, enabling us to come together to keep fit and healthy, and helping to make our areas more pleasant places to live. The pocket parks fund, which was launched...
two years ago, has helped to transform neglected and derelict spaces. It has led to the creation of more than 80 new green spaces for communities to enjoy in urban areas across the country. I am delighted that Barnsley is home to one of these pocket parks—the community pocket park at Bradford Forster Square. I am also pleased to say that the Government intend to build on this success with a second round of funding for pocket parks, which will provide access to new smaller parks and vital green spaces for our communities in areas where there are limited opportunities today.

The hon. Gentleman asked a specific question about devolution. He will know that I am not the Minister with particular responsibility for that, so I hope he will bear with me when I cannot give him the exact response he wants. My understanding is that the Government and the Minister responsible are considering the matter of One Yorkshire devolution, which the hon. Gentleman rightly identifies as being of some personal interest to me. There is no fixed timeframe for a response that I am aware of, but if there is one, I will be sure to write to him in short order.

On the hon. Gentleman’s broader question about the devolution framework, my understanding is that the Minister with responsibility for devolution and the northern powerhouse will publish that towards the end of this year. However, again, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will write to him when I can get the exact date from my colleague, if one has been published.

On that note, I agree wholeheartedly with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s argument about devolving power to local people. He is obviously an exponent of that, and I hope he will agree that this Government have undertaken an ambitious and significant devolution programme to bring government closer to people up and down this country. I think that we are all excited to see that programme continue.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Gentleman again for calling this important debate. It is a real privilege for me to have this job and to champion local government in Westminster. Whether it is driving economic growth, caring for the most vulnerable or building stronger communities, local councils in Barnsley, throughout the Sheffield city region and across the country do an important and incredible job. I am grateful for their dedication, and I will continue to ensure that their voice is heard and that they get the support they need and deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

7.20 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 31 October 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

MLA Pay

1. Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the allocation of the savings accrued from the reduction in the pay of Members of the Legislative Assembly. [907318]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Shailesh Vara): My Department has no role in the allocation of any savings resulting from the reduction in MLA pay. The budget for the payment of salaries to MLAs is held by the Assembly Commission. Any savings would be returned to the central Consolidated Fund for redistribution within the Northern Ireland civil service, and their reallocation would be for that civil service to determine. I can also advise that the Secretary of State has today written to the Assembly Commission to bring the pay reduction into effect.

Ged Killen: In their LGBT action plan, the Government allocated £4.5 million for an implementation fund that will be available to voluntary sector groups in England, but when I was in Northern Ireland recently, I met people in similar groups facing even greater challenges who have never received Government support from Stormont or Westminster. I have already asked the Secretary of State about that and I wrote to her on 7 September, and I have not had a reply. Will the Secretary of State consider supporting funding for these groups—if not from MLA pay, from another source?

Mr Speaker: I assume that the hon. Gentleman means from the allocation of the savings accrued, which renders it relevant to the question on the Order Paper?

Ged Killen indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Very good. Well done.

Mr Vara: Thank you for clarifying that, Mr Speaker; it is much appreciated. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will receive a response from the Secretary of State very soon.

Any unspent money or savings would be returned to the central Consolidated Fund, for redistribution within the Northern Ireland civil service, and it is for civil servants to allocate as they feel appropriate.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the pay reduction seems a bit unfair, because the vast majority of MLAs actually want to do their job, and it is only a small percentage that are stopping the Assembly being reassembled?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the vast majority want to get on with doing their job; but we have to recognise that some of their duties have lessened, so we are making a reduction but recognising that they still have constituents to look after and are still voices within their communities.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I would be fascinated to know how much it has cost to pay the MLAs their full salary since the collapse of the Assembly and the Executive in January 2017. Is it £12 million, £13 million, £14 million? Does the Minister honestly believe that was money well spent, when our education budgets and our health budget in Northern Ireland are so overstretched?

Mr Vara: I do not know what the precise sum is, but I fully appreciate and am happy to put on record the hon. Lady’s commitment to this issue, on which she has spoken regularly. When the talks collapsed, there was an element of good will and we hoped that the parties would return and form the Executive again. There has to be an element of good will, rather than instantly saying, “Right: we are making reductions.” We had that element of good will; we had to introduce legislation for the cuts, and we also had to have the review conducted by Trevor Reaney.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Last week, the Secretary of State said she wanted to see action on victims’ and survivors’ pensions. May I press the Minister, because legacy is a Northern Ireland Office responsibility? Will the Government pledge the considerable savings from MLA pay to those pensions and make good on the UK Government’s promise to the victims and survivors of the troubles?

Mr Vara: As I said earlier, as far as any savings are concerned, the unspent money will be redistributed to the central Consolidated Fund for redistribution to the civil service, who can then reallocate. As far as legacy issues are concerned, the pension issue is actually a devolved matter.

Devolved Government

2. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [907319]

8. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [907325]

11. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [907326]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill, which we debated last week, has now been taken through both Houses. It provides
for a period in which an Executive can be formed at any time, allowing for time and space for talks to take place without an election having to be called. I continue to engage with the main parties to discuss the implementation of the Bill and next steps towards the restoration of devolution, and I have called a meeting for that purpose tomorrow, in Belfast. I am also continuing to engage with the Irish Government, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I will be in Dublin on Friday for a meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Additionally, I am actively considering how and when external facilitation could play a constructive role in efforts to restore political dialogue. This will form part of my discussions with the parties. I am also extremely keen to support grassroots dialogue. This will form part of my discussions with the parties. I am also extremely keen to support grassroots dialogue following a productive meeting with Church leaders earlier this month.

David Duguid: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. As Conservatives and as Scottish Conservatives, we respect devolution—in contrast to others. However, can we ensure that the people of Northern Ireland continue to have the ultimate say on what laws are passed on their behalf?

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend as members of the Conservative and Unionist party, we know that devolution is the best way to strengthen our precious Union. That is why it is absolutely vital that decisions that are rightly devolved should be made by politicians elected by people in the nations and regions of our country, as appropriate under the devolution settlement.

Damien Moore: Does the Secretary of State agree that the people of Northern Ireland deserve to have their devolved Administration restored so that their representatives can make crucial spending choices, such as on health and education?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend again makes an important point; we discussed it last week. The very best thing for the people of Northern Ireland is devolved Government—the people they elected representing them and making decisions on their behalf.

Huw Merriman: I welcome the legislation. How should it help to bring the Executive back together again in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The point of the legislation is that it provides the space and the time for the parties to come together and put the best conditions in place for those parties to come back around the table, do the right thing by the people who elected them, and form an Executive and get back into the Assembly.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In the continuing absence of devolved Government, the Secretary of State will be aware that a further 1,044 neurology patients have been recalled following the further revision of the notes of Dr Michael Watt in the Belfast trust area. That brings the total number of patients recalled to 3,544. Has the Secretary of State spoken to the Health Department in Northern Ireland about this issue, and what can she say today to provide assurance and relieve the anxiety and worry that many of these people will obviously have at the present time?

Karen Bradley: My Department’s officials and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), speak regularly to the permanent secretary and other officials in the Department of Health. I also meet the permanent secretary to discuss various matters, including those we discussed in terms of the Bill last week, which, when it becomes an Act of Parliament, will give civil servants the ability to make decisions, as they rightly should. But that is not a substitute for devolved Government, and we need to have Ministers in place to make important decisions, because these are devolved matters that should be dealt with by devolved Ministers.

Nigel Dodds: I hear what the Secretary of State says, but these are people living with real anxiety and real worries at the present time, and she has an opportunity to do something about it now. Rather than wait, can she not say something to these people that will provide them with real hope that the inquiry will proceed quickly and that action will be taken to ensure that this kind of thing does not happen again?

Karen Bradley: I know that the right hon. Gentleman, who as a constituency MP represents many people affected by this, cares deeply about this matter and wants to see action taken. I, too, want to see action taken, and I will be happy to discuss this with him separately in terms of what actually can be done under the devolution and constitutional arrangements in place.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): If the Executive are not restored by the end of the year, will the Secretary of State use the powers she is about to get under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill to issue guidance to ensure that Northern Ireland gets a proper cancer strategy, since it is the only part of the UK that does not have one, and I am afraid that outcomes are reflecting that?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend, who served as a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office and is Chair of the Select Committee, understands the devolution settlement and constitutional arrangements better than many people. He will know that it will be for Ministers to make the decision on the implementation of the cancer strategy, but clearly the guidance that accompanies the Bill will be issued after Royal Assent, and I would hope that civil servants will take the decisions that they can take within that guidance.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I think the House will want to recall that this is the 25th anniversary of the Greysteel massacre, and our thoughts go out to the victims and their families.

The Secretary of State makes the point that devolved matters should be dealt with by the Assembly, and she will recognise that social security is a devolved matter. She probably cannot tell the House how many people will lose as they transfer to universal credit, but what she can do is give guidance to civil servants saying that the roll-out will stop in Northern Ireland until there is an Assembly competent to make that decision.
Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Gentleman in marking the 25th anniversary of the Greysteel attack. It was a horrific and totally unjustified attack that killed eight and wounded a further 19, and 25 years on, we must not forget the sacrifices that were made or the huge progress that Northern Ireland has made since the Belfast agreement was signed 20 years ago.

The hon. Gentleman asks about welfare in Northern Ireland. Again, I refer him to the constitutional and devolution settlements. He knows how they operate; the guidance will be issued and civil servants will make appropriate decisions.

Business Promotion

3. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to promote Northern Ireland businesses throughout the world.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Great Britain and Northern Ireland truly are great, and the “Great” campaign helps to promote exporters from across the whole UK. It is complemented by UK Export Finance, which has provided nearly £33 million of support for exporters in Northern Ireland, resulting in more than £46 million-worth of overseas sales.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): For business to export and grow, it needs adequate support. What actions will the Secretary of State take to ensure that Northern Ireland’s businesses can benefit from some of the initiatives announced this week, including in relation to the high street?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is a doughty campaigner for her constituents, and I know that she cares a great deal about ensuring that Northern Ireland is an economic success. I am sure she welcomes the £2 million that has been secured for in-year spending in Belfast to deal with the regeneration following the Primark fire earlier this year. The city deals also play an incredibly important part, but I repeat that devolved government is the way to give Northern Ireland the best opportunities and success, which is why we need to see Ministers in Stormont.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As the Secretary of State champions Northern Ireland’s businesses around the world, will she remind the European Union negotiators that, in the December joint report, they signed up to Northern Ireland businesses having unfettered access to the rest of the United Kingdom? She should remind them of this, because they seem to have forgotten.

Karen Bradley: I regularly remind many people about this. Paragraph 49 of the protocol is one that many focus on, but paragraph 50 of the joint report is equally valid. It deals with unfettered access to the markets of Great Britain and the United Kingdom and the fact that there should be no new regulatory barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. These are incredibly important for ensuring the economic success of Northern Ireland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I should like to echo the comments made by both Front Benchers about the Greysteel massacre. Our thoughts are very much with those who were involved. Is the Secretary of State aware of recent comments made in Northern Ireland by the CBI president John Allan, when he said that business would always prefer a backstop to a no-deal Brexit? He added that the backstop could be an opportunity to open up frictionless trade between the EU and UK markets. Given that widely shared opinion, why is her supposedly pro-business Government seeking to undermine the backstop and therefore undermine business in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the Greysteel massacre, but I have to correct him on his second point. This Government are completely committed to all the commitments that we made in the joint report before Christmas. We are looking at how to put a backstop into legal text to ensure that the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom is respected and that there is no border on the island of Ireland.

Police: Border Funding

4. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Whether the Government have plans to provide additional funding to the Police Service of Northern Ireland to police any potential border in the island of Ireland.

Karen Bradley: We have said categorically that there will be no physical infrastructure or related checks and patrols at the border. We are committed to a future partnership on security, policing and justice with the EU, including Ireland, that will allow the Police Service of Northern Ireland to continue to tackle national security threats and serious and organised crime. The PSNI has submitted its case for additional resources, and that bid is currently being considered.

Mike Kane: The European arrest warrant is key to cross-border policing. Can the Secretary of State confirm that it will be retained post Brexit?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that the use of the arrest warrant is very important in Northern Ireland, and we have been clear that we need to have access to the same instrument or an
equivalent for that to continue. I was a Minister in the Home Office when we were debating the 2014 opt-outs and opt-ins, and at that time I was determined that we would retain access to the European arrest warrant.

Karen Bradley: The Government’s proposals for a facilitated customs arrangement are clear that there is no need for any border checks on the island of Ireland, and that is what our proposals are determined to achieve.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the review of police funding will consider Northern Ireland’s needs to ensure that every citizen is safe in that part of our country?

Karen Bradley: This Government have never shied away from the need to ensure proper funding for policing in Northern Ireland. Together with our security services, the PSNI does incredible work to keep us all safe. However, the threat level remains severe, which is why it is vital to ensure that proper funding for the PSNI continues.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The funding application now rests with the Treasury, so will the Secretary of State ensure that it is treated quickly? Will she also assure us that recruitment to the PSNI will not be blocked as a result of Sinn Féin’s closing down of the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Karen Bradley: I speak regularly with the Chief Constable, the assistant chief constable and others, and I am as committed as the hon. Gentleman to ensuring that the PSNI has the funding it needs. The bid is going through the proper processes, as it rightly should, and I am determined to ensure that the PSNI can continue to recruit as necessary.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you can scarce imagine how unbounded my joy was when I heard that austerity was over, or at least coming to an end. In view of that, will the Secretary of State confirm the lifting of the pay cap affecting the PSNI and the countless other public sector workers who feel, with some justification, that they have been abandoned by this Government?

Karen Bradley: I hope that I do not require the hon. Gentleman’s services at all in mopping up water, which he so ably did for me last week. Many of his questions will be dealt with through the police funding settlement and the spending review next year, and the Minister for Policing and the Chancellor will quite rightly be making those announcements.

Mr Speaker: I think we can agree that the hon. Gentleman’s thespian skills are superior to his mopping up skills.

The Executive and Legislative Assembly

6. Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent steps her Department has taken to seek the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Legislative Assembly.

Karen Bradley: It is vital to ensure that proper funding for the PSNI continues.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill provides for a period in which an Executive can be formed at any time without an election having to be called. I have remained in contact with the Northern Ireland parties during the passage of the Bill and will discuss its implementation and next steps in a roundtable meeting with them tomorrow.

Chris Stephens: The Secretary of State will be aware that the Independent Reporting Commission concluded last week that key factors in bringing paramilitarism to an end were political leadership and the re-establishment of political structures in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree? If so, can she explain the absence of formal talks between the political parties since February?

Karen Bradley: As I said earlier, the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland would be if the politicians whom they elected come together to form an Executive, get back into the Assembly and make decisions on their behalf. As a member of this Government, I support devolution across the whole United Kingdom, and I want to see it operating properly.

Mr Carmichael: Does the first report of the Independent Reporting Commission not illustrate that the political parties of Northern Ireland must choose one of two sides at this point? They are either on the side of getting the Executive back up and running, or else they are on the side of growing paramilitarism and all the attendant dangers that that brings.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The Independent Reporting Commission’s first report is clear that the decisions that would benefit everybody in Northern Ireland must be made by Ministers. We have passed a Bill that will enable civil servants to make decisions to allow the continued running of public services, but they are clearly no substitute for elected politicians and Ministers in Stormont.

Political Parties: Loans and Donations

7. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will make it her policy to publish information on loans and donations given to Northern Ireland political parties since 2014.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The Independent Reporting Commission’s first report is clear that the decisions that would benefit everybody in Northern Ireland must be made by Ministers. We have passed a Bill that will enable civil servants to make decisions to allow the continued running of public services, but they are clearly no substitute for elected politicians and Ministers in Stormont.

Mr Speaker: I think we can agree that the hon. Gentleman’s thespian skills are superior to his mopping up skills.
should be welcomed by the whole House. The decision to publish data from July 2017 was taken on the basis of consultation and broad support from the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland.

**Layla Moran:** How can it be right that the very party that would come under investigation if donations dating back to 2014 were published essentially gets a veto? We know that the leave campaign is now under investigation for donations during the referendum. Surely Northern Ireland deserves that kind of transparency, too. Why are this Government ignoring the recommendations of the Electoral Commission?

**Mr Vara:** I am sorry that the hon. Lady seeks to make political capital out of this. The then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend, Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), wrote to all the political parties in January 2017 regarding transparency and a date. With the exception of one party, they all agreed on the way forward. As for any other issues, I am sorry that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) cannot accept the broad view of the majority of parties in Northern Ireland.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the loophole that allows millions of pounds of donations, including money from America, to be channelled to Sinn Féin through the Irish Republic drives a coach and horses through the UK’s financing rules that seek to prevent foreign influence on elections in the UK? This loophole needs to be closed for Northern Ireland to be brought in line with the rest of the UK.

**Mr Vara:** I appreciate that this is a long-standing issue and a matter of concern. What I will say is that we have just introduced measures for transparency. It is important that we have some data as we move forward. Then, as with many other things, there is no reason why there cannot be a review. When that review takes place, there will be consultation with the Northern Ireland parties and the Electoral Commission.

**IRA and INLA Victims**

10. **Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps she has taken to seek closure for victims of the Irish Republican Army and Irish National Liberation Army activity during the troubles. [907327]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley):** I have been deeply moved by the personal stories of pain and suffering endured by the families of the victims and survivors of the troubles. That is why we have consulted on how we best move forward and address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past. I wanted everyone to have the opportunity to be heard, and over 17,000 responses have been received. It is right that we take the time to consider those responses carefully. We will set out how we intend to move forward in due course.

**Greg Hands:** I met the Home Secretary yesterday on behalf of Airey Neave’s family to discuss his brutal murder on these very premises almost 40 years ago. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland join me in saying that the victims of the IRA and the INLA on mainland Britain also deserve information and closure on the troubles?

**Karen Bradley:** My right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for the family of Airey Neave, some of whom live in his constituency. We have spoken about the issue, and he will know that this matter is dealt with by the Home Office, as are all terrorist atrocities in Great Britain. I will work with him to get that closure.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her response. The victims of the Irish Republican Army and the Irish National Liberation Army in Northern Ireland deserve recognition. What discussions has she had with the police to set aside money for those investigations to take place?

**Karen Bradley:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Today the Police Service of Northern Ireland, through its legacy investigations unit, is investigating far too many troubles-related crimes, and proportionately more killings relating to the military and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. That is not right, and that is why we want to change the system. [Interruption.]

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. I would like there to be an appropriate hush for the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray).

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): The witch hunt against our brave veterans is unacceptable.

**Mr Speaker:** That is extraordinarily interesting, but I think we should start with Question 12.

**Legacy Consultation**

12. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What progress she has made on the consultation on addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past. [907329]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley):** The legacy consultation ran for 21 weeks and, during that time, representatives from the Northern Ireland Office engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, victims’ and survivors’ groups, political parties, community groups and others.

**Mrs Murray:** The witch hunt against our brave veterans is unacceptable. My constituent, who lives opposite the surgery where I used to work, has reportedly refused much-needed medical treatment so that he can get to court. Many will not forgive us, and nor should they, if he is lost due to disease once this case continues. When will the Government stop consulting and bring an end to these ridiculous cases?

**Karen Bradley:** We all owe a vast debt of gratitude for the heroism and bravery of the soldiers and police officers who upheld the rule of law during the troubles in Northern Ireland. The current system under which my hon. Friend’s constituent is being investigated is not
working well for anyone, which is why we consulted on how we can improve it as quickly as possible. We are reviewing the thousands of responses received and we will set out in due course how we intend to respond.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh very well, we will hear the good doctor if it is a sentence. I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that someone must cut the Gordian knot that is preventing us from ensuring that our armed forces veterans are not persecuted and pursued in the courts decades after they have faithfully served us?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend has done significant work in this area, and I agree with him that the current system is simply not working for anyone and we need to change it. I look forward to working with him to find a way of changing the system that works for people.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907378] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 31 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know that the whole House would like to join me in sending our deepest condolences to the families of those who were killed in the horrific attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on Saturday. The UK stands shoulder to shoulder with our Jewish friends across the world.

This is the last Prime Minister’s questions before Armistice Day, and this year’s is particularly poignant, as it marks 100 years since the end of the first world war. It is right that we remember all those who lost their lives in the first world war, and unreservedly condemn it for what it is.

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

Alan Brown: I concur with the condolences about the horrific massacre and about those who have served in our armed forces.

My Italian-born constituent Laura Nani has resided here since 1984, has attended school here, has had two children and has a British mother, yet the Department for Work and Pensions has just decided that she “does not have a right to reside”.

That is partly because she cannot prove she has had five years of continuous work, a situation that many European Union nationals, including my wife, will find themselves in when formally applying for settled status. So what message does the Prime Minister have for Laura, for my wife and for other EU nationals who face rejection by this heartless UK Government?

The Prime Minister: EU nationals do not face rejection by this Government. We have been very clear about our commitment to protect the rights of EU nationals who are living here in the United Kingdom when we leave the EU.

Q4. [907381] Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about Armistice Day? That will be welcomed by the 1st Battalion, The Rifles, who are based in my constituency.

The Prime Minister will know that the tax burden is approaching a 50-year high and that we do not help families with the cost of living by raising their taxes, so I am really pleased that we kept our promise to cut taxes for 32 million people. May I ask her to make sure that as the economy grows we continue both to cut taxes and to spend money on our priorities in a balanced way that works for everyone in our country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. He is absolutely right: the Budget did cut taxes for 32 million people, and the rise in the personal allowance will leave a basic rate taxpayer more than £1,200 better off next year than they were in 2010. Helping people with the cost of living is not just about those income tax cuts: the rise in the national living wage next year will give a full-time worker an extra £2,750 in annual pay since its introduction; and of course by freezing fuel duty we have saved the average driver £1,000 compared with pre-2010 plans. We will continue to help with the cost of living with our balanced approach to the economy.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in sending our sympathies and solidarity to the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. The attack was disgusting, depraved and appalling, and I am sure that every single Member of this House would completely and unreservedly condemn it for what it is.

I will be joining the Prime Minister to commemorate Armistice Day and remember all those who lost their lives in the first world war and, indeed, all the other wars since.

Mr Speaker:

“If I were a prison governor, a local authority chief executive or a head teacher, I would struggle to find much to celebrate” in the Budget.

“I would be preparing for more difficult years ahead.” Does the Prime Minister think that that analysis is wrong?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman looks at what we set out in the Budget, he will see that we set out more money for schools, more money for prisons—/Interruption./ Yes, more money for prisons. What we have set out in the Budget is that austerity is indeed ending. What does that mean? Ending austerity is about continuing to bring debt down and putting more into our public services. We will set out further details in the spending review. Ending austerity is not just about putting more into public services; it is about putting more money into people’s pockets, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) just made clear. What we are doing in this Budget is
giving the NHS the biggest cash boost in its history. The Leader of the Opposition used to ask me what taxes would go up to fund the rise in NHS funding; the answer on Monday was that it is fully funded without putting up taxes.

Jeremy Corbyn: Just for the record, the words that I quoted in my previous question were from the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Non-protected Departments face a real-terms cut of £4.1 billion. The Prime Minister promised that austerity was over; the reality is that it was a broken-promise Budget, and she knows it.

With violent crime rising, police numbers slashed and conviction rates down, why did the Government fail to find a single penny for neighbourhood policing in the Budget?

The Prime Minister: First, we did put extra money into counter-terrorism policing in the Budget. That was on top of the £460 million extra that has been made available for policing this year. That is in sharp contrast to what the Labour party was saying at the 2015 election, when it said that the police should take 10% cuts in their budgets.

Jeremy Corbyn: Mr Speaker: “This is just another example of the contempt in which the Government holds police officers.”

Who said that? Not me; the Police Federation. No wonder the Police Federation and police chiefs are taking the Government to court over their pay.

With school funding cut by 8% per pupil, do the Prime Minister and her Chancellor think that the “little extras” are enough to end austerity in our schools?

The Prime Minister: What we actually see happening, as I said earlier, is more money for schools announced in the Budget. That is on top of the £1.4 billion extra that has already been announced for schools this year, and a further £1.2 billion will go into schools next year. The right hon. Gentleman is wrong, because overall per pupil funding is being protected in real terms by this Government. What do we see in the Budget? We are ending austerity, bringing debt down and putting more money into our public services. We are taking the country forward. What would he do? His policy would mean borrowing more, taxing more and wasting more, and taking us back to square one.

Jeremy Corbyn: Mr Speaker: “Many schools, including mine, have had to resort to asking students and their parents for funds.”

That is not me but Sasha, a parent, worried about the future of her school, because this broken promise Budget means that headteachers will still be writing begging letters to parents. Can the Prime Minister explain why she chose not to end the benefit freeze for 10 million low-income households, but, instead, brought forward a tax cut for higher earners?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have put extra money into universal credit in the Budget. Importantly, universal credit is a welfare reform that ensures that people are encouraged to get into the workplace and that, when they are there, they earn more. I am interested that he chose to raise the question of tax cuts. On Monday, he said that cutting taxes for 32 million people was frittering money away on “ideological tax cuts”. Yesterday, the shadow Chancellor said that Labour would support the tax cuts. [Hon. Members: “Ah!”] On Monday, the Leader of the Opposition, talked about tax cuts for the rich. Yesterday, his shadow Chancellor said what we have always known, which is that the tax cuts were for “middle earners”—“head teachers and people like that”.

When the right hon. Gentleman stands up, perhaps he can tell the House whether he will back the tax cuts and vote for the Budget—[Interruption.]

Jeremy Corbyn: The benefit freeze takes £1.5 billion—[Interruption. If the right hon. Gentleman will wait a moment, I will explain my question.

Mr Speaker: Order. It does not matter; I have all the time in the world. It will take as long as it takes. The right hon. Gentleman will address a House that has the manners to listen. The same goes for when the Prime Minister is speaking. There will be a decent display of respect, and we will go on for as long as necessary, as the public would expect, to ensure that that is the way we operate. That is all there is to it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The benefit freeze takes £1.5 billion from 10 million low and middle-income households. A low-income couple with children will be £200 worse off. For them, there is no end to austerity. Labour would have ended the benefit freeze. As the Prime Minister well knows, Labour policy is to raise taxes for the top 5% and for the biggest corporations in the country. That would be a fair way of dealing with financial issues facing this country. Will she kindly confirm that there is still another £5 billion of cuts to social security to come in this Parliament—if it lasts until 2022—hitting the incomes of those with the least? Will she confirm that—yes, or no?

The Prime Minister: Of course, what the right hon. Gentleman fails to mention from the Budget is that, as a result of the changes that we have made on universal credit, 2.4 million people will benefit by £630 a year. When he talks about helping those who are on low incomes, I say, yes, we are helping people on low incomes—we are saving people money by freezing fuel duty. That has been opposed by the Labour party. We are letting people keep more of the money that they earn by cutting income tax. That has been opposed by the Labour party. He keeps claiming that he is backing working people, but I say to him again that if he wants to put more money into people’s pockets, and if he wants to take care of working people, he should vote for the Conservative Budget on Thursday.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am really not very clear whether that was a yes or a no.

The Prime Minister once claimed to be concerned about “burning injustices”—well, that concern has fizzled out, hasn’t it? This was a broken promise Budget. The Prime Minister pledged to end austerity at her party
conference, and the Chancellor failed to deliver it in this House. The cuts continue. Those on lower incomes will be worse off as a result of this Budget. Austerity has failed and needs to end now. It is very clear: only Labour can be trusted to end austerity, end the cuts for those on the lowest incomes and invest in our country again. Now we know: councils, schools, police, prisons—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members may shout as long and as loudly as they like, and if they feel that they want to indulge themselves doing that, so be it. The right hon. Gentleman's question will be heard—[HON. MEMBERS: "When it comes."] Yes, when it comes, but it will be heard in full, so do not waste your breath and damage your voices.

Jeremy Corbyn: Mr Speaker, I am sure that some Conservative Members will not have heard what I was saying, so I shall repeat it for their benefit. Now we know: councils, schools, police, prisons, public sector workers and people reliant on social security still face years of austerity. Will the Prime Minister apologise for her broken promise that she was going to end austerity, because she has failed to do that?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the right hon. Gentleman talked about my commitment to tackle burning injustices. [Interruption.] "Yes", they say from the Opposition Front Bench. Indeed. Was it Labour that introduced the Modern Slavery Act? No, it was not. Was it Labour that ensured that people in mental health crisis were not being taken to police cells as a place of safety? No, it was me. Was it the Labour party that introduced the race disparity audit, so that for the first time we can see what is happening to people from across our communities in this country? No, it was me and this Government. And I will tell him what else this Government have done—by taking a balanced approach to the economy and careful financial management, what do we see? Borrowing down, unemployment down, income tax down—[Interruption.] "Up", Opposition Members say. I shall tell them what has gone up—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) must be heard. The reply from the Prime Minister must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Labour Members want to know what has gone up. I shall tell them what has gone up—[Interruption.] As long as it takes, I am going to tell them. Support for public services up, growth up, wages up—but debt is falling and austerity is ending. Under the Conservatives, the hard work of the British people is paying off.

Q10. [907387] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): CLIC Sargent, a wonderful cancer charity for children, has found that families in Harlow face a 54-mile round trip to get to their nearest treatment location, costing them up to £161.58 per month. Average families taking their children for cancer treatment are paying £180 per month. Given the huge £20 billion increase in the NHS budget, will my right hon. Friend meet me and CLIC Sargent, and introduce a young cancer travel fund to help those families with the cost of living?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He raises a very important issue. Obviously, our thoughts are with those children and their families at what must be a really difficult time for both the children and their families. We continue to look at what we can do to help them. I believe that when he talks about children from his constituency going to the nearest specialist treatment centre, that is Great Ormond Street, which does wonderful work in this country for children. We have a healthcare travel cost scheme that allows patients to receive reimbursement for their travel costs if they are in receipt of a qualifying benefit and on a low income, but we absolutely recognise that there is more to do, particularly on the cost of living for cancer patients, including children and young people, as my right hon. Friend said. I know that the relevant Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care will be very pleased to meet him and the charity to discuss that further.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks regarding the Tree of Life massacre and, of course, Armistice Day?

Can the Prime Minister guarantee the supply of medicines to the NHS in the light of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: First of all, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are working for a good deal for Brexit. As he will also know, all Departments—indeed, we have issued technical notices to businesses and others—are making contingency arrangements should no deal occur.

Ian Blackford: Of course, that was no answer to the question, “Can the Prime Minister guarantee the supply of medicines in the light of no deal?” Why did this Government, last week, quietly begin a dramatically truncated tender process to try to stockpile medicines, at a cost of tens of millions of pounds—funds that should be spent on frontline health services? The Prime Minister has only been concerned about how Brexit might harm the Conservative party; it is time that she woke up to the real harm that Brexit will do to our people and to patients. Is it not the truth that this Government are in a blind panic trying to cover for a blind Brexit?

The Prime Minister: No. Let me just say to the right hon. Gentleman, first of all, that if he had been listening and paying attention over the last months, he would have known that actually in the Budget last year the Chancellor made it clear that there was money available for no-deal planning. We stepped up the no-deal planning in the summer. Departments like the DHSC are ensuring that they are making the responsible contingency decisions that any Government Department would make. What we are doing is working for a good deal for Brexit, and we are working for a good deal that will benefit the whole of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Q11. [907388] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I always thought the Chancellor was a bit iffy about Brexit, but how wrong I was. This week he announced a Brexit dividend Budget if we come out of the European Union with no deal. He will be able to cut tariffs, abolish VAT on certain products, and reallocate the £39 billion that he was going to give to the EU to
this country, cutting taxes, improving public services, and lowering debt. Prime Minister, I always thought that you could be the Queen of Brexit, but did you ever think that the Chancellor could be the King of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to see the support my hon. Friend shows for the Chancellor. What the Chancellor delivered this week was a Budget that is good for people up and down this country, and we should all be celebrating that.

The Prime Minister: In overall terms, we have been closing the tax gap over the years. As I think my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said in his Budget on Monday, since 2010, through the work we have been doing to close the tax gap to ensure that we deal with tax evasion and avoidance, we have actually collected, or protected, £185 billion of revenue for the Government.

Q2. [907379] Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): In 2014, I wrote to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the then Chancellor to ask how much tax was unpaid on letting income from private landlords. HMRC wrote back to me and said that it was £500 million, in its estimate, which is enough to build about 7,000 social homes. How much is that tax gap now?

The Prime Minister: It is 47 years ago this week that the UK’s last space launch took place through the Black Arrow project. Many of us feel that that is too long. While the confirmation of the vertical spaceport in Scotland is very welcome, the real prize is to be first to market with horizontal launch capability. As the Prime Minister will know, Spaceport Cornwall is well placed to deliver that prize. Will she confirm that the Government remain ambitious to be a first mover on horizontal launch, and will she back Spaceport Cornwall’s bid?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. He is, as I would expect, championing the cause of Cornwall, and one or two of my other hon. Friends from Cornwall are supporting him. We have awarded grants worth £31.5 million to enable satellites to be launched from UK soil, and we have also announced a £2 million fund, subject to business case, to help boost airports’ ambitions to offer horizontal space flight. That includes sites such as Newquay, Glasgow Prestwick and Snowdonia. The UK space flight programme continues to consider these leading proposals, and I am sure it has heard my hon. Friend’s championing of the request for Cornwall.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. I am pleased that I was able to set up the inquiry into child sexual abuse. As I said at the time, I think people will be shocked to know the extent to which children were being abused in this country in many different environments and circumstances. She has raised a particular issue in relation to Nottinghamshire. When the independent inquiry’s report comes forward, we will look at its recommendations very seriously. I will ask the relevant Minister to look at the issue that she raised about survivors’ groups. We have worked with survivors’ groups—I did so when I was at the Home Office. It was talking to them and hearing from them that made me realise exactly how terribly badly people have been treated, the appalling crimes committed and the appalling abuse they have suffered. That is why it is important that this independent inquiry gets to the truth.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Following the welcome call overnight from the American Administration for the ending of the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen, will my right hon. Friend use Britain’s undoubted authority at the United Nations to press for a new Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and meaningful and inclusive negotiations, to end what is the worst and most terrifying humanitarian catastrophe on the planet?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, who I know has been consistent in pressing on the needs of the people of Yemen. We certainly back the US’s call for de-escalation in Yemen. He references our role in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, in March we proposed and co-ordinated a UN Security Council presidential statement, which called on the parties to agree steps towards a ceasefire. That remains our position, but as the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said in the House yesterday, “a nationwide ceasefire will have an effect on the ground only if it is underpinned by a political deal between the conflict parties.” —[Official Report, 30 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 775.]

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed that matter last night with Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy. They agreed that the UK will continue to encourage all parties to agree to de-escalation and to a lasting political deal that will ensure that any ceasefire will hold in the long term.

Q5. [907382] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Young women are dying because if they are aged under 25 they cannot get a cervical smear test, even if they have the relevant symptoms, and even if their GP wants them to have one. Will the Prime Minister take the easiest decision she will be asked to take this year and abolish this arbitrary age limit, and in doing so save women’s lives?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. It is one that has been raised before. Of course, on issues like this, it is important that we take clinical guidance, but issues about the
funding of £100 million into it, and there are pilot
published a strategy to deal with this; we have put initial
commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and to end
sleepers has shot up by 268% on her watch?

The Prime Minister: We recognise that we need to
take action in relation to rough sleepers. We have a
commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and to end
rough sleeping by 2027. That is why we have already
published a strategy to deal with this; we have put initial
funding of £100 million into it, and there are pilot
projects being worked on in various parts of the country.
If he is interested in this issue of rough sleeping, I hope
he will support the proposals that the Government have
put forward, which were confirmed in the Budget, for
increasing stamp duty on those purchasing properties
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Q6. [907383] Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Since
2010, the number of rough sleepers has risen from
1,700 to 4,700. We now have homeless tent encampments
outside on Victoria Street. Homelessness charities believe
that one of the main reasons for the huge increase is the
botched introduction of universal credit and a general
hostile environment towards the poor. May I ask the
Prime Minister why she believes the number of rough
sleepers has shot up by 268% on her watch?

The Prime Minister: We recognise that we need to
take action in relation to rough sleepers. We have a
commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and to end
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Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will
my right hon. Friend join me, when she goes to the
Cenotaph next Sunday, in paying tribute not only to
our own war dead from this country, but to the 3 million
who came from the Commonwealth to serve in the
cause of freedom? I will, sadly, not be in Tonbridge this
weekend; I will be laying a wreath in Delhi, paying my
own tribute—and, I know, paying tribute on behalf of
the whole House—to those who suffered and died.

Will the Prime Minister join me also in wearing a
khadi poppy at some point, the reason for which is that
the homespun cotton remembers Gandhi’s and India’s
contribution to the effort? It is a vital reminder to all of
us here of our links around the world, but particularly
to India.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for
highlighting the vital contribution that was made by
soldiers from around the Commonwealth—he has
highlighted particularly those from India. I also pay
tribute to him for his own military service. We must
never forget that over 74,000 soldiers came from undivided
India and lost their lives—eleven of them won the
Victoria Cross for their outstanding bravery—and he
will know they played a crucial role in the war across
multiple continents. I would also like to congratulate
the Royal British Legion and Lord Gadhia on their
efforts in recognising this contribution with the special
khadi poppy, honouring the sacrifice of everyone who
served a century ago.

I am certainly interested in wearing a khadi poppy at
some stage over the period as we lead up to Armistice
Day, just as I am pleased to be wearing—[ Interruption. ]
The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who
is on the Front Bench opposite, says she is wearing one,
which I am very pleased to see. I would also like to say
that I am very pleased to wear the ceramic poppy
today—I see a number of hon. Members are wearing
them, and they were created by children at a school in
the north-west. [HON. MEMBERS: “St Vincent’s.”] St Vincent’s,
indeed. It is very important, at this centenary, that we
all recognise and that younger generations understand
the immense sacrifice that was made for their freedom.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Prime
Minister, you quite rightly referenced the centenary
of the first world war. Would that not be a very fitting
time to end another burning injustice—namely, the
legal scapegoating of brave Army veterans by others for
political or financial gain? Last week, 104 of your
Conservative colleagues, Opposition Members and over
50 Members of the other place, including four previous
Chiefs of the Defence Staff, wrote to you and asked you
to join with us in defending those who defended us. I
know that there are only 104 of us—but nevertheless,
are you with us?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the passion with
which my right hon. Friend championed the interests
of our brave soldiers; we owe so much to them across so
many different areas and so many different fronts—for
their heroism, their bravery and everything they have
done to maintain our freedom.

My right hon. Friend has raised particularly, in the
past and now, the issue that was raised in Northern
Ireland questions as well: the legacy concerns in relation
to what happened during the troubles and the cases
being taken against not just soldiers, but police officers, who also bravely defended freedom in Northern Ireland and acted against the terrorists.

We are committed to making sure that all outstanding deaths in Northern Ireland should be investigated in a way that is fair, balanced and proportionate. The current mechanisms are not proportionate: there is a disproportionate focus on former members of the armed forces and the police. We want to see these deaths being investigated in ways that are fair, balanced and, as I say, proportionate.

Q8. [907385] Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I have a constituent, Mr Hassan Mirza—a UK citizen—who for the best part of the last decade has been unsuccessfully trying simply to renew his passport. For some of our fellow citizens, the system is clearly broken. May I ask the Prime Minister whether her office—not the Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister—will review this case and then come back to this House and tell us whether waiting 10 years simply to renew a passport is even remotely acceptable?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will make sure that the case is properly looked into.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I associate myself with the fine words of the Prime Minister and others about the armistice. May I invite her to warmly welcome the choir of the Bundestag and its President, who will join our own Parliament’s choir this evening at a commemorative concert in Westminster Hall to mark this historic occasion?

Mr Speaker: I was hoping that the right hon. Lady was going to offer us a little sample of what is in store.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my right hon. Friend in welcoming the choir of the Bundestag and the German Vice-President to the concert taking place this evening—a fitting way to recognise the centenary of the armistice. As my right hon. Friend may also know, the German President will be laying a wreath at the Cenotaph this year. What armistice gives us is an opportunity to come together to remember the immense sacrifices made in war, but also to join with our German friends to mark reconciliation and the peace that exists between our two nations today. The concert this evening is part of that, as will be the German President’s presence at the Cenotaph.

Q9. [907386] Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Prime Minister rightly chooses north–west Wales as the place to spend her holidays and her mountain walks inspire her to make decisions such as the 2017 general election. Among the delights of north Wales is its food and farming sector, in particular Menai Strait seafood. It relies on direct and fast exports to the European Union, which are currently free of barriers and tariffs. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that that sector, as well as the automotive and aviation sectors, will after March be able to enjoy the same free movement, underpinned by a comprehensive customs union?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has named a number of sectors. We have heard from those sectors their concern about frictionless trade. The proposal we have put forward to the European Union would provide for that frictionless trade as part of a free trade area.
report was agreed. But we are actually going further than that. I was pleased to be in Norway yesterday and to discuss with European economic area and European Free Trade Association countries the protection we will give to EEA and EFTA citizens when we leave the European Union.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): There are 50,000 amputees in Syria. Will the Prime Minister join me at the “Singing for Syrians” flagship concert in St Margaret’s to hear parliamentarians from across the House sing like they can hear us, and remind the people from Syria, the civilians, that we have not forgotten them?

The Prime Minister: I will look at my diary. I cannot guarantee, standing here, that I will be able to attend the concert, but I commend my hon. Friend. Friend and the parliamentarians who will be taking part in it for the work that they are doing. “Singing for Syrians” is a great movement. It is a great thing that not just raises money, but reminds people of the importance of remembering those civilians in Syria. As she says, we want to ensure that they know they have not been forgotten.

Q15. [907392] Mary Glindon (North Tynside) (Lab): The only way that Smulders in North Tynside can continue to bid successfully for jacket foundation contracts is if the National Grid cables over the Tyne are moved. Will the Prime Minister commit her good offices to work with the National Grid to have the cables removed by 2020, so that Smulders and other major North Tynside and wider Tynside manufacturers can win contracts and secure north-east jobs for many years to come?

The Prime Minister: I will be pleased to make sure that a relevant Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy looks at the issue that the hon. Lady has raised.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): During a recent meeting with primary school heads in Chichester, I was shocked to discover that every single one of them had been subject to violent attacks by pupils or parents. As the Government launch their NHS violence reduction strategy today, will my right hon. Friend consider what else we can do to protect our teachers in the valuable work that they do?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly happy to look at the issue at that my hon. Friend has raised. She refers to what I assume is physical violence or attacks that teachers have been under. I have also seen cases where teachers have come under considerable, I would say, harassment and bullying on social media as well, so I think this is an issue that we do need to look at.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Black Cultural Archives, based in Lambeth—I am a patron of it—is the only national heritage centre dedicated to preserving and celebrating the histories of black people in this country. However, unlike other national institutions such as the National Gallery or the British Museum, which get over 40% of their funding from central Government, BCA currently receives none and is under threat of closure. The Prime Minister talked about the race disparity audit. Can I ask her to explain the differential treatment of BCA and in this Windrush year, of all years, to right this wrong and provide it with the funding that it desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that a difference of approach is taken between those museums that are considered to be national museums and those that have developed in other circumstances. I recognise what he is saying about the importance of this particular organisation and the relevance of what it is commemorating and reflecting, and I will ask a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Minister to look at the issue that he has raised.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): High streets are the centres of our communities, and they have a social as well as an economic function, but the internet has changed everything. That is why I welcome the levelling of the playing field announced in the Budget this week through the cut in business rates and through the future high streets fund, but will local businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough be able to work with the local council to decide how that money is spent?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the help that we are providing to the high street through our future high streets fund. As he says, this will enable local areas to develop and fund plans to make their high streets and town centres fit for the future. We will be supporting local leadership with a high streets taskforce, giving high streets and town centres expert advice on how to adapt and thrive, and it will be possible for local businesses to work with their local authorities to develop the plans that will indeed ensure that we continue to have plans for the high street that are fit for our towns and cities.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last week, the Prime Minister inadvertently misled the House in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) over police pensions. This week, it has emerged that the National Police Chiefs’ Council has taken the unprecedented step of threatening legal action against the Government over their £165 million raid on pensions. Is it not the case that, under the Prime Minister’s leadership, this Government have destroyed relations with the police so considerably that they have risked public safety?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is wrong in her portrayal of what has happened. I said that the pensions issue had been known about for a number of years, and indeed it has been known about for a number of years. We are committed to public sector pensions that are fair to public workers but also fair to the taxpayer. It is important that the costs of those public sector pensions are understood and fully recognised by the Government. The Budget has made it clear that £4.5 billion is available next year to support public services in managing these increased pension costs, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is working closely with the police to understand the impact of the pension changes and to ensure we make the right funding decisions to support frontline services.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Prime Minister tell the House why she and her Government believe that Government spending should be increased faster on
overseas aid than on hard-pressed schools and police and fire services in the UK? While this House might be typically out of touch with public opinion on this issue, will she accept that the vast majority of the British people think that that warped priority is crazy crackers?

The Prime Minister: I continue to believe it is right that the UK maintains its commitment to spending 0.7% of GNI on international development. I suggest that my hon. Friend look at the speech I gave in South Africa in August when I explained how we wanted to ensure that international development aid not only helped the most vulnerable people across the world but helped countries to provide the economies, good governance and jobs that would take them out of needing that aid in the future. It is right that we continue with our commitment to the poorest people across the world and to helping countries to secure a long-term, sustainable future.
Mr Speaker: I am sure that hon. Members leaving the Chamber are doing so quickly and quietly so that the rest of us can attend to the point of order from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

Thangam Debbonaire: In helping my constituent C to push the Child Maintenance Service to pursue the well-off but self-employed father of her two young children, I tabled a written parliamentary question about the difference in maintenance recovery between self-employed and employed absent parents. The Department told me that it held the data but that it was too expensive to provide. What guidance can you give me, Mr Speaker, on how I can push past this brick wall in pursuit of feckless dads failing to pay their maintenance and letting down their children?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. My answer, off the top of my head, is twofold. Traditionally, the member of the Government who has felt a particular responsibility to chase answers from Ministers if they are not forthcoming, or to seek a substantive answer if it has not been provided, has been the Leader of the House. That has been the tradition over a very long period. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has approached the Leader of the House, but she is on the Treasury Bench and will have heard her point of order. It manifestly and incontrovertibly is the responsibility of Ministers to answer questions. I must advise the hon. Lady that there are circumstances in which it can genuinely and credibly be claimed that the provision of an answer would be disproportionately expensive, although that sounds rather unlikely in this case, given that the material is retained. She might seek to enlist the assistance of the Leader of the House. Alternatively, I would advise her to write to the extremely distinguished Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who may well wish to assist her in the way he has assisted Members across the House pretty much throughout his tenure as the distinguished Chair of the Committee. I hope that that is helpful.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a sensitive issue, and I hope that I phrase it correctly. We are all alert to the scourge of drugs in our towns and cities. I think the House would agree that if the sins of the father or the mother cannot be visited upon the sons, the same is true in reverse, but there is a case, as you will be aware, Mr Speaker, currently alive in the media involving a passholder in this place—and being a passholder is an honour, not a right—who has been found guilty of a drugs-related crime. In preserving what I hope all quarters of the House would agree is an important aspiration—namely, public confidence in this place and in those people who carry passes—what role do the Commission and other House authorities have with regards to Members of this place and those to whom they issue passes?

Mr Speaker: I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, though I am mildly disappointed that he did not furnish me with advance notice either of his intention to raise it or—better still—an indication as to its content. I say in all courtesy to him—I have known him for 30 years and he is a very decent chap—that it has absolutely nothing to do with the House of Commons Commission; it is a matter for me. I am very clear about that. If that matter is brought to my attention, ideally privately, I will discharge my responsibilities on the subject. I hope that my bona fides in such matters over a long period are unarguable. I hope that he feels satisfied that he has raised the point. I will deal with it sensibly.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has come to my attention that this week is Living Wage Week, but it was not raised this morning in Prime Minister’s questions. Can you advise me how I can further highlight the question of Whitehall cleaners and their massive pay disparity? They serve the House of Commons as well as anyone else.

Mr Speaker: I do not think they serve the House of Commons. I do not want to engage in a Second Reading-style debate with the hon. Lady—

Catherine West: Ministers.

Mr Speaker: Yes, they may well serve Ministers, who are Members of the House of Commons, but they do not serve the House of Commons as an institution. The hon. Lady has achieved her objective in raising this issue. I will just say, not least for the benefit of Members who came into this place in 2017—and I say it with considerable pride—that this House is a living wage employer, as it should be. I was determined that it should secure its accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation. Absolutely everybody who works here should be paid at least the London living wage. If there are examples of people working within the Government service who are not receiving that remuneration, that is a matter of considerable concern, but that concern will have been heard by a Treasury Minister on the Treasury Bench. I can advise further the hon. Lady that if she feels that it has been inadequately aired in this Chamber and she wants a debate on the matter, she might find she is successful.

I hope that the point of order appetite has been satisfied, at least for today, and on the assumption that it has, perhaps we can move on.
Banking and Post Office Services (Rural Areas and Small Communities)

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

12.58 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require banks to provide certain services in rural areas and small communities; to make provision for access to Post Office services in such areas and communities; and for connected purposes.

The Bill would amend the law relating to banking and Post Office services; make provisions to strengthen access to banking for rural and small communities by placing the access to banking standard on a statutory footing; place a duty on banks that received taxpayer funds to establish a community investment fund for when those banks leave a community; and strengthen the provision of Post Office services for rural and small communities across the UK.

As a liberal Conservative, I believe in the free market. However, many banks and financial institutions must shoulder a considerable burden of responsibility for the 2008 recession and their subsequent actions. They have endangered customers and taken money from the Government and they are now happily abandoning some of the most vulnerable communities they claim to support.

I think very few people in this House would argue that the digital revolution is not having an impact on the way people bank. However, it is the speed at which banks are withdrawing those services, the uneven distribution of the services that remain, and the incredibly weak substitutes that those banks are offering that is so completely unacceptable to our constituents. According to Retail Banker International, the number of bank branches in the UK dropped by 37% between 2007 and 2017. Meanwhile, in 2013, the Campaign for Community Banking Services produced an estimate of the number of “unbanked communities”, which stated that there were 840 communities with only one bank left, and 1,500 communities that had lost all access to their banks.

Since 2017, the Royal Bank of Scotland, for example, has announced the closure of 603 branches across the United Kingdom since 2017, 60 of which were in Scotland and three of which were in my constituency. Scant regard has been given to the impact on rural communities of closing those branches. In the case of Comrie and St Fillans in my constituency, the elderly are expected to make a 50-plus mile round trip, taking approximately two hours by bus—a journey that will hardly become more bearable as we head into the cold, winter months in Perthshire.

It is also the profile of the closures that grates. As the University of Nottingham identified, the “largest decline in branch numbers are characterised by...the least affluent third of the population bearing the brunt of two thirds of net closures”.

That analysis was further reinforced by the Reuters news agency, which, in its 2016 analysis of Office for National Statistics figures, found that more than 90% of the 600 closures between April 2015 and 2016 “were in areas where median household income was below the British average of £27,600”.

At a time when financial inclusion and the need for enhanced social mobility is more important than ever, banks are pulling up the ladders of financial advancement for our poorer communities.

Meanwhile, despite justifying the closures on the grounds of the movement in consumer behaviour from branch to digital, these retail banks are still opening branches—opening branches in the oh-so rural and disconnected wards of Chelsea, Canary Wharf and Clapham, areas with 99%, 96.2% and 99.9% superfast broadband connectivity respectively, versus the 85.5% in my constituency. They are serving the customers they want, not those who need their services.

In the meantime, these retail banks have come to Select Committees here in this House and told us that they have done enough to cater for our communities—providing mobile banks for the elderly in some of the coldest and most geographically challenging parts of the UK, driving banking online in constituencies that struggle with mobile signal, let alone superfast broadband, and providing single community bankers as a substitute for a full-service branch. It is simply not good enough, especially when many of these institutions took British taxpayers’ funding 10 years ago.

So, when the banks refuse to listen to their local customers and their elected representatives from across the House, I ask the House to do what it was intended for: to legislate and stand up for the rights of small communities and vulnerable individuals. The Bill I present today proposes to do three things. First, it would formalise the access to banking standard, making it a legal requirement for all banks. It would also strengthen the access to banking standard, adding a requirement for a “rural weighting” to be taken into consideration as part of the impact assessment that is included within the standard. These further considerations would be in addition to the criteria, and would take into account local geography and winter weather patterns; local public transport links, including frequency and routes; and broadband and mobile coverage—benchmarked against the national average.

The Bill will also make it a requirement, if a bank branch is to be closed early, to state clearly what consultation has taken place with the local Post Office as an alternative provider of banking services. It will also include a requirement for an ATM and a deposit service to be maintained as a basic level of service in a town or village. That is not a criticism of the access to banking standard as it currently stands—indeed, quite the opposite; I believe it holds some excellent standards of best practice. It is simply that giving the standard a statutory footing would give it additional heft to hold the banks to account.

Secondly, the Bill will seek to establish a community fund of £100,000 for each branch closure of banks that have had Government funding, or have Government as a significant shareholder. It is widely recognised that bank branches not only provide vital services to local individuals, businesses and community groups, but often occupy key positions in a town or village, contributing to the vibrancy of the high street and providing an indicator of local economic dynamism. However, the banks’ movement towards cities and out of the settlements that they support creates a responsibility for them to provide ongoing services and support the communities and customers that they are abandoning.

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According to figures provided by the Library, bank branch closures dampen lending growth to small and medium enterprises by an average of 63% in those postcodes that lose a bank branch. The figure grows to 104% in postcode areas that lose their last bank in town, where there is an average of £1.6 million less lending as a result of that branch leaving town.

Therefore, £100,000 would not only help address the loss of business, but would go some way in supporting the local community, to be allocated to projects that help boost local high street activity and fund provisions for vulnerable people to access banking services, such as the extension of broadband to rural properties—which could of course be used in conjunction with the Government’s gigabyte voucher scheme. The community funds follow a precedent established by many energy firms, where they create community funds and profit-share agreements as part of local deals to install onshore wind farms.

Thirdly and finally, the Bill will strengthen the provision of Post Office services, which are having to pick up the pieces of the banks’ abandonment of our rural and small communities. Building on the Government’s capital fund to modernise the Post Office, under the Bill a closing bank must, before leaving a small town or village, deliver a direct mail to all affected customers, detailing the alternative banking measures provided and what services will be available through the Post Office, funded by the UK Government, including solutions for more substantial cash deposits for small businesses.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government invested over £2 billion in the post office network, allowing the Post Office to modernise its network and protect more than 3,000 “last shop in the village” community branches. The Post Office currently offers services on withdrawals, deposits, cheques and balance inquiries for both personal and business banking customers, meaning that it is already well set up to deal with the increase in cash transactions when a decision is taken for a local bank branch to close. These services are provided for virtually all banks.

Although the Post Office does not currently have specific provisions for rural branches, it does recognise that bank branch closures will be felt more keenly in rural locations. Currently, the postmaster is remunerated in line with the value of cash deposits and withdrawals made. While the existing framework with the banks has an agreed fee for that, the fee often does not reflect the true cost in time taken to undertake that work—a point that will only be exacerbated in rural branches. Therefore, if banks are closing their branches in rural areas and post offices are picking up the pieces of bank branch closures, it would be only fair that the fee be adjusted to a more competitive rate, which allows for a weighting that more fairly reflects the costs for a rural post office branch, especially as the banks are seeing savings in the closing of branches. This would go a long way to secure further the post office network in such rural areas.

I am a fervent believer in the market economy, but in a time of great change, Government must ensure that no community is left behind. When banks and institutions have accepted public funding, they must accept that it comes with public responsibilities. We cannot have rural and small communities being abandoned; we cannot have a two-speed United Kingdom, so I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Luke Graham, John Lamont, Kirstene Hair, Scott Mann, Kevin Hollinrake, Jamie Stone, Caroline Flint, Martin Whitfield, Pete Wishart, Stephen Gethins and Ben Lake present the Bill.

Luke Graham accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 281).
Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 30 October).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2019-20.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The measures taken in the Budget position Britain as one of the nations on earth that can take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities that are transforming every economy, every trade and every industry in the world. During the past few years, much of the economic debate has centred on two big subjects. The first is how to repair the economy from the ravages of the financial crisis and the previous Labour Government, when borrowing soared to 10% of national income and nearly one in every four pounds of what the Government spent was borrowed. Through eight years of fiscal discipline, involving sacrifice by the British people but backed in three general elections, the public finances have now been transformed so that this year borrowing will be not 10% but 1.9% of national income, and our national debt will fall in every year ahead, falling over the period of the forecast by over 10% of our national income. Sound money is the foundation of a sound economy, and the Conservative party has once again restored it to Britain.

Secondly, much of the recent debate has of course been about Brexit, and the Chancellor was clear that we are looking to secure a good deal with the European Union in the weeks ahead, and that achieving that will provide a further boost to the economy as growth will be revised upwards and, with it, revenues, jobs and wages. Our modern industrial strategy, reinforced by measures in the Budget, can see us embrace the prosperity of every part of the United Kingdom.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned Brexit. Has he seen the Office for Budget Responsibility document that says that because of the uncertainty caused by his Government’s handling of Brexit, the economy was between 2% and 2.5% smaller by mid-2018 than it would have been otherwise?

Greg Clark: If, as I hope and expect, we secure a good deal, those figures will be revised upwards, with consequent benefits right across the economy.

This is one of the most exciting times in the history of business, technology, science and commerce. From farming to retail, from manufacturing to the creative industries, the analysis of previously unimaginable quantities of data is changing lives. Doctors can diagnose diseases and treat them successfully even before we display any symptoms. As Members with interests in the automotive sector will acknowledge, there will be more change in the cars we drive in the 10 years ahead than since the invention of the internal combustion engine, as electric motors replace engines and navigation by satellite and sensor replace human control.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, a lot of developments are taking place in the automobile industry, for example in Coventry on electric cars. He will also know that there are a lot of concerns in companies including Jaguar Land Rover in relation to the diesel tax on the one hand and Brexit on the other, and the Secretary of State has been very good in meeting us on those subjects.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he says. I am a regular visitor to the west midlands and to Coventry, and of course it is vital for one of our proudest and most successful industries that we should be able to build on that success by seizing the initiative in the years ahead. Every country in the world is moving to electric and autonomous vehicles and, including in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, we have some of the best brains on the planet in developing that new technology. I absolutely determined that we will not do what happened in the past—we invent the technologies yet see them deployed elsewhere—but that instead we will manufacture these batteries and these vehicles, and that we will do so in every part of the country.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab) rose—

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab) rose—

Greg Clark: I will give way first to another west midlands MP, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

Richard Burden: Will the Secretary of State recognise the real concerns expressed to him by the automotive industry about the contradictory and confused signals coming out of Government in relation to fiscal policy and vehicle excise duty? Is there not something wrong when the system as it is at present penalises most the cars that are the cleanest and most CO₂ efficient? In the next few months, as he and his colleagues consult the industry on the introduction of the worldwide light vehicle test procedure, will he ensure that such perverse incentives do not continue into the next financial year?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The next generation of diesel engines are much more environmentally friendly and fuel-efficient than their predecessors, so to replace an existing old-style engine with a new one is a step in the right direction, and I have been very clear, as I think he knows, that diesel will have a role to play as we transition to a 100% emissions-free world. That is captured in the “Road to Zero” strategy on which we consulted the industry, and I know that he was involved in those discussions.

Albert Owen: The Secretary of State talked about not losing our ideas. He will know that there are great ideas now in the marine energy technology sector, but they are at an early stage and companies need help and support before they can manufacture in this country. Will he have a word with the Chancellor so that we can have proper ring-fenced finance for this industry, as we had for wind energy under a Labour Government and for solar? Those sectors are now successful, but marine energy is lagging behind.

Greg Clark: We have an expanding innovation budget and we will have more to say about that in the weeks ahead, because our industrial strategy recognises the
importance of seizing the opportunities that we have in clean growth, in which we are a world leader in many cases. I want to do with clean growth just what we are doing in the automotive sector, and marine and tidal energy is an important part of that.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): This is not just about manufacturing. If we are going to be successful, we are going to need the raw materials. As the Secretary of State will be aware, there is great potential in Cornwall for lithium mining, which will become ever more important with all the electric vehicles we are going to have. So does he share my enthusiasm for that potential, not just for the Cornish economy but in securing a domestic supply of this ever more important metal for the UK?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and it is his second chance in the space of an hour to talk about Cornwall’s place in our industrial future, whether through lithium for batteries or as a centre for the launch of satellites and space vehicles. He makes his case passionately, and of course we want to make sure we can source the materials for this new technology. Cornwall is a good place for that.

On clean growth, last year was the first time since the industrial revolution, forged in this country, in which a day passed in Britain with no coal being used to provide our power supply. This revolution is gathering pace, and the most exciting thing about these transformations is that Britain—British businesses, British scientists, British designers, British inventors, British workers—can lead the world in every one of them. Of the satellites that gather and transmit information for cars to navigate, a quarter—[Interruption.] I am surprised that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who I thought had an interest in science and technology, would not want to acknowledge the fact that a quarter of all the communications satellites orbiting the Earth today were built in Britain. We have over half the entire world market in the booming small satellite market. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) pointed out to the Prime Minister today, we will have the first satellite launch pad in Europe. We are not just manufacturing and inventing the technology, therefore; we will be the go-to place to launch it as well.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned satellites. May I point out that 100% of the glass used in space technology and satellites around the globe is built in my constituency by Qioptiq?

Greg Clark: I did not know that, but I will add it to my repertoire of boasts about our national capability, and I am very pleased to learn it.

Also, having been the place where the genome was sequenced, we are the place where the secrets that it unlocked are being discovered and applied to the benefit of patients.

Our modern industrial strategy reinforces Britain’s future as a place of competition, innovation and challenge where new ideas can take flight and where any incumbent can be challenged by the newest start-up. Monday’s Budget pressed home the advantages and continued the progress we are making, including in addressing areas in which we need to improve. We have the biggest increase in public investment in research and development that this country has had in its history, with £1 billion more for the industrial strategy challenge fund.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This morning, leaders in genomics met in the House of Commons. They are world leaders based in Britain, and they told us how cures and treatments are being delivered to patients in the NHS today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is this Government’s investment in science and research that has led to us being a world leader in this area?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. I had a good meeting with the global chief executives of some of the most important life sciences companies around the world, in which it was readily acknowledged that the strength of our science base, and the visibility of our commitment to reinforce it, to invest in it and to apply it in manufacturing, is causing investment to be made here. The global pharma and life sciences company MSD has announced that its new research centre is going to be here in the UK, and I had the pleasure of opening the Novo Nordisk facility just a few months ago. It is evident that there is more to come. One of the benefits of a long-term strategy and commitment is that it can have short-term results because people invest on the back of it.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State is talking positively about the future of the life sciences sector, but does he recall that just last week the head of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry told the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union that without full membership of the European Union that the global pharma and life sciences company, the European Medicines Agency, the future of the life sciences industry was not tenable in this country?

Greg Clark: I do not agree. I think that the future of the industry is strong in all scenarios. I regard our ability to participate in institutions and research networks as being of great importance, and that is why I hope that the deal that is being negotiated will succeed and that we will be able to move forward based on that confidence.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome our ranking in the climate change performance index? The UK is fifth in that index, ahead of Finland, France and Germany.

Greg Clark: I do recognise that. The combination of a rigorous commitment to emissions reduction targets and an industrial strategy that makes it possible for us to glean the benefits of that is being admired by many countries around the world.
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that carbon capture, utilisation and storage has enormous potential? I had a meeting with the Carbon Capture and Storage Association this morning, in which it emphasised clearly that a development pathway in 2019 would have enormous benefits for our ability to deliver a net zero target by mid-century.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is a good example of how a strategy to integrate different strands of policy and work can be of great benefit to many of the industries on Teeside that he represents so well. We will have more to say about that.

Building on the success of the Faraday challenge, which aims to make Britain a place for the design and manufacture of new battery technologies, the Stephenson challenge referred to in the Budget will support innovation in electric motors. We are emphasising the “D” side of R&D: development as well as research. The “Made Smarter” review, which was championed and led by Juergen Maier, the chief executive of Siemens in this country, is spreading the take-up of new manufacturing technologies to businesses small and large. A national quantum computing centre will scale up quantum systems into workable machines. An industrial energy transformation fund will help many energy-intensive businesses to reduce their energy costs as they transition to a low-carbon future, at the same time as making them more competitive.

New fellowships in artificial intelligence will attract the world’s best research talent to our shores, building on our success with institutions such as the Turing Institute. On infrastructure, the Budget ensures that the digital revolution will extend to all parts of the country, through new funding for new ways of deploying full fibre broadband in rural locations.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The one thing that goes across all the areas that my right hon. Friend has been talking about is our investment in fusion technology. He might be about to say something about that, but I was really pleased to see £20 million being given to that area in the Budget. Will he confirm that the Euratom issue is now over, and that we can look forward to a successful fusion technology industry continuing in this country?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, which gives me the chance to confirm that there will be £20 million of investment—and it is investment—in the centre of excellence in fusion research. It will pay dividends for many years to come. The discussions on the successor arrangements to Euratom have gone as I hoped they would—that is, cordially and expeditiously—and good progress has been made on all the issues under discussion. We have made the necessary agreements with most of our major counterparts.

On places, the Budget announced extra funding for the Strength in Places fund, supporting local collaborations between business and research across the UK. This was also an important Budget for Britain’s small businesses. Extending the start-up loans programme will help more aspiring entrepreneurs to take the plunge. Further funding for the knowledge transfer partnerships will place graduates in smaller firms across the United Kingdom. The fivefold increase in the annual investment allowance will help to support firms as they invest and grow, and the £1.5 billion boost to small high street retailers, including £900 million in business rates relief, will support small businesses right across the country.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The post office in our high street has been downgraded from a Crown post office and its services are being reduced. Our retailers in our high street are worried that this will mean fewer people coming into the community. What can the Minister say to reassure the retailers in our high street?

Greg Clark: One of our proudest achievements in Government has been to halt the destruction of the post office network—[Interruption.] It is substantially the same in numerical terms across the country as it was when we came into office. That is very important, for exactly the reason that the hon. Lady has set out. Post offices are crucial to many high streets and to the many small businesses that make use of their services.

We are in the early days of a period of spectacular opportunity for Britain. The truth is that none of the achievements that are within our grasp would be possible without the willingness of investors and entrepreneurs to take a risk in backing new ideas.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Notwithstanding the attractions of Cornwall, the vertical take-off site for the UK is going to be in my constituency, and I would be churlish if I did not express my thanks to Her Majesty’s Government for that decision. In Caithness, we have exactly the kind of skills and knowledge in Thurso and Dounreay that the Secretary of State is referring to. Will the Government ensure that those skills and that knowledge are transferred and used to boost the laudable scheme for the space launch in my constituency?

Greg Clark: I am glad to hear that from the hon. Gentleman. I had a great visit to his beautiful constituency and he is right to say that it has skills that can be deployed in the space industry now. It also has the opportunity, working with local colleges, to develop and grow the skills that the space industry will need if it is to create good, well-paid jobs there in the future. This decision is great news for the north of Scotland and for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome the £200 million more that is to be given to the British Business Bank as part of the Budget, and also the announcement that a team from the bank is to be based in Scotland. The Secretary of State knows that I have an ongoing concern about the availability of quality patient capital, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. What is his assessment of the current availability of that kind of capital?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend highlights a piece of advocacy that he has made personally and as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to ensure that we give growing businesses the ability to expand. That investment by and through the British Business Bank, particularly through its regional focus on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is very important. It should be close to the people in whom it is investing.
[Greg Clark]

By investing in new equipment and employing new people, it is businesses that create jobs, not the Government. Businesses provide people with the earnings they need to live good lives. After the family and education, it is businesses that provide most of us with the best opportunity to develop and make the most of our talents. It is businesses that pay for every single one of our public services, both directly and by employing people. Governments cannot do such things, but they can stand in the way. There is no successful society anywhere in the world that is not based on successful businesses.

However, at a time when we need national determination to invest in future business success through a long-term approach, we have an Opposition whose would-be Chancellor describes business as the “real enemy”. A month ago in Liverpool—a city that drove out business when the hard left last seized power, taking a generation to recover—a chilling warning was sounded to the world: “If you dare to invest in Britain, 10% of your value will be seized forever without compensation. You’ll be taxed at the highest level in the peacetime history of this country. You’ll be trapped in a nightmare economy where, at a stroke, the state goes a third of a trillion pounds more into debt. The would-be Government fully expect a run on the pound and capital flight.” Whatever uncertainty there is over Brexit, businesses tell me time and again that their biggest nightmare would be to have the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor in Downing Street.

The choice could not be clearer. Britain has the chance to be in the vanguard of the most exciting developments in the history of global commerce and innovation, or to be shunned by investors as one of the most left-wing, anti-enterprise, ruinously indebted nations in the developed world. The aim of this project is to build a country in which our children and grandchildren can look forward with confidence to ever-stronger security and ever-growing opportunity. That choice has never been more vital for Britain, and I commend the Budget to the House.

1.31 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): With the leave of the House, I shall speak instead of the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who has been taken ill and is disappointed not to be here today. We wish her a speedy recovery.

Every Opposition Member is disappointed by the Chancellor’s Budget, which can best be described as a “broken promises” Budget, despite the spin that the Secretary of State has tried to place on it. The Prime Minister promised the end of austerity, but the Chancellor was already backtracking within the first few minutes of his speech, simply saying that austerity is “coming to an end” and even that turned out not to be true. Austerity is certainly not over.

The truth is that the small giveaways in this Budget do not begin to even touch the sides of the cuts made since the Government took office. The £1.7 billion promised to universal credit is less than a third of the £7 billion of social security cuts still to come. School funding has been cut by 8%, but there was nothing to fill the gap, and the Chancellor’s idea that schools should be grateful for a one-off payment of £400 million for “little extras” is insulting. Local councils still face a funding gap of £7.8 billion by 2025, and budgets will be cut by a further £1.3 billion next year. How is that the end of austerity? In fact, the Resolution Foundation has predicted that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will have suffered a real-terms per capita cut of over 50% by 2024.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Secretary of State just mentioned Liverpool. Since 2010, Liverpool’s local authority budget has been cut by 64%. That is the problem that Liverpool is facing today.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. All our constituents have had to suffer cuts to services, so for the Secretary of State to say that austerity is over is an insult to our intelligence.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Like Liverpool, Durham County Council has lost nearly half its budget since 2010, and the cuts are still going on. This Budget contained no change to next year’s cuts in revenue support grant, so another £40 million will be taken out of the council’s budget.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The services that make such a difference to our constituents’ daily lives face increased cuts, which is why our constituents know that austerity is not ending under this Government.

Mr Simon Clarke: Do the hon. Lady’s constituents want to pay billions more in tax or to have the nation weighed down by billions or even trillions more in borrowing?

Chi Onwurah: Our manifesto commitments show that 95% of the people of this country would not suffer any tax increase under a Labour Government. The Conservatives have managed to double our debt, while preaching austerity—doubling the debt because the economy did not grow significantly under the austerity ideology.

The Secretary of State may point to the increased spend on the NHS as an example of austerity ending, but the Health Foundation has branded it as simply not enough. Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said yesterday that if we look at total spending—\[Interruption.\] The Secretary of State seems to suggest that health spending is not relevant to the economy, but it is the wellbeing of all our constituents that enables us to deliver an economy that works for everyone. Paul Johnson of the IFS said:

“If you look at total spending beyond the NHS it’s not really going anywhere... If you look at total spending as a fraction of national income, it’s not really going anywhere... This is not a dramatic change in the sense of undoing much of the cuts we’ve had over the last eight years.”

The Chancellor has squandered an opportunity to repair the damage done to our public services and our economy by his predecessor’s pursuit of a failed economic ideology. That ideology has created many of the problems holding back our economy today, from chronically low productivity and business investment to eye-watering levels of inequality in terms of both income and geography.
Vicky Ford: What was eye watering was the debt under the previous Labour Government. Does the hon. Lady not agree that growth of over 1.5% going hand in hand with public spending is a phenomenal achievement and is thanks to a balanced economy?

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Lady should finally recognise that the economic crisis—the crash—was caused by casino capitalism and reckless bankers, and the Conservative party chose to make the poorest people pay for it, and they continue to pay, given the slowest recovery since the Napoleonic era.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the economy was growing and national debt was below 50% when Labour left Government? Debt has grown to 85% under this Government because of their failed austerity programme. Indeed, when we built the NHS in 1948, debt was 250% of GDP, but it dropped because we invested in the economy.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He could give a lesson in basic economics to most Conservative Members.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is it not a fact that debt was 43% of GDP when Labour came to office in 1997 and went down to 40% by 2006? That was down to good management of the economy before the crash. Through those years, the Conservative party was not just agreeing to our spending commitments, but asking for more expenditure, so we will have no lessons from the Tory party about reckless spending.

Chi Onwurah: Absolutely. The Conservative party initiated and promoted the reckless deregulation of our financial sector, which contributed significantly to the financial crisis, and then failed to manage the economy in such a way as to ensure sustained, significant growth. Under this Government, we have had half the historical level of growth.

The prognosis for growth is reflected in business investment, which is the lowest in the G7. We are the only major economy in which investment is falling. Our productivity is 15% lower than in other major economies, and it has not grown this slowly since the Napoleonic wars—there is an achievement. The average real wage growth since the second world war is 2.4% a year, but under the Conservatives, pay has fallen by 3% and the UK remains the most regionally unequal country in Europe.

We needed a big Budget to rebalance our economy and to provide the industrial strategy with the backing it needs to address the serious problems, but the Budget is deeply disappointing. We got an arbitrary announcement of more funding for the national productivity investment fund, but that will be in 2023, with no information on where the money will be allocated.

On research and development, we had another repackaging of money that was announced last year dressed up as additional funding when, in fact, of the £1.6 billion cited by the Government only £180 million, barely 10%, is new. Although we are pleased that there has been a marked increase in R&D expenditure, there is still no overarching strategy for its direction or for how the Government intend to meet their target of spending 2.4% of GDP on R&D. We are a world leader in science, but, let us be clear, the Government’s 2.4% target is average when it comes to R&D spend. Labour’s target is 3% to become one of the leading nations in R&D spend.

What little information there was in the Budget again focused on sexy high-tech areas like nuclear fusion and quantum mechanics. As an engineer, I understand the desire of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to be associated with sexy technologies, and it is of course a vital part of our industrial strategy to support the industries of the future, but the Secretary of State has repeatedly failed to recognise that supporting our biggest sectors to improve their productivity through technology and investment is so important.

Retail is one of the biggest employers outside the public sector, and it is facing a unique crisis. Over 100,000 jobs have been lost in the past three years, and over 25,000 shops stand empty. High streets are the centre of communities, and they should and can continue to be vibrant spaces of which communities are proud, but to achieve that we need proactive policies from the Government, as Labour have been demanding for months.

The Secretary of State has been a bit cheeky and stolen a number of Labour’s policies in this area. A register of empty properties, an adjustment to business rates and a high street taskforce were just some of the policy proposals in the conference speech of my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State. It would be churlish of me to demand our policies back, but that is where the consensus ends.

The Government’s overall package, “Our Plan for the High Street,” simply does not do enough. Business rates relief would not have saved a single House of Fraser or Debenhams—the vast majority of retail workers are employed in such shops. The British Retail Consortium has said that the Government “must engage in more extensive business rates reform to help all retailers and their employees through this period of transformation.”

The CBI responded: “Smaller businesses will be relieved by the support on Business Rates... But larger retailers and manufacturers—and the millions they employ across the UK—will continue to suffer needlessly until there is a full, in-depth review.”

Yet the Budget contained no commitment to a review of business rates.

The future high streets fund is yet another fund allocated out of the national productivity investment fund, and there are no details of where the money will be targeted, who will be responsible for administering it or how quickly funds will be made available. The proposals for planning reform have missed the point. It seems that the Government’s idea to save our high streets is to turn them into non-high streets. Frankly, much more work is needed if we are to protect our high streets and the millions of workers who rely on them.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the high street. Does she agree that it is ridiculous of the Chancellor to ask that local authorities develop a plan for their high streets, which is something we support, while he is taking away the means for them to be able to plan for their high streets by introducing yet more permitted development?
Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The attack on the capacity of local authorities, as well as on their powers, means that their ability to determine the future of our high streets is severely limited.

Retail is our biggest employment sector, and many of the job losses will be in towns and cities outside London and the south-east where good jobs are already hard to find. The precariousness of work in the retail sector is one symptom of the crisis blighting high streets across the UK.

There is very little in this Budget for workers, across all sectors, who after eight years of austerity are facing an uncertain future. Only yesterday, workers marched on Parliament to demand proper pay and terms and conditions. Many of those workers are outsourced to private providers and are on precarious, poorly paid contracts. Yet the Government continue to turn a blind eye, and there is absolutely nothing in the Budget to improve the lives of those marching.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The hon. Lady is completely right on that point. Does she agree that it is a disgrace that, after Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy talked out my private Member’s Bill to ban unpaid trial shifts, which are a blight on retail, the Government now refuse to meet anybody to talk about it, despite acknowledging that unpaid trial shifts are a major problem?

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I look forward to the Government’s response.

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: I will now make some progress, as I am sure Mr Speaker will not indulge me much longer.

I am not sure what is needed for the Conservative Government to see that their economic policies are causing more harm than good. Rising prices and stagnating wages mean that people are now £800 a year worse off than they were a decade ago. Just under half a million young people are still unemployed, and one in nine are in insecure agency work, on a zero-hours contract or in low-paid self-employment. That is the everyday reality for millions of working people—the people behind the supposed record levels of employment bandied about by the Government as the marker of a successful labour market.

The truth is that there are real issues in our labour market—rising insecurity, stagnating wages and a productivity crisis—so it is disappointing to see so little to address them in the Budget. There are increases to the minimum wage or, as the Government have rebranded it, the national living wage, but it is still significantly below the rate set for the real living wage. One in five people earn less than the wage they need to get by, according to the Living Wage Foundation, and the increases will not change that. In addition, unlike the Government’s minimum wage, the real living wage is based on a review of the evidence on what is happening to people’s living standards right now.

The Government’s failure to immediately reform the IR35 rules, which govern how much tax those working as contractors pay, shows that they are refusing to take tax avoidance seriously. By pushing back those reforms to 2020, the Government are denying themselves much-needed revenue, which could be used to properly fund our schools and the NHS, or to pay workers a decent wage. How many more people need to take to the streets protesting about their precarious working conditions? How bad do things have to get before the Government finally take action?

We have heard lots of warm words about defence spending, but they are cold comfort to many of the workers in the shipbuilding industry, such as at Cammell Laird and Appledore, who are facing real uncertainty as to whether their jobs are safe. It is disappointing that the Government failed to announce any support for our manufacturing or shipbuilding industries, which are vital to our long-term economic success.

In the same month that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the leading authority on climate change, set out the devastating consequences for human civilisation of a business-as-usual approach and the scale of ambition needed to avoid dangerous climate change, what did the Chancellor do? He did not even mention climate change, and the Red Book was little better. The Chancellor left the carbon price support unchanged and said that the Government would seek to reduce the rate if the total carbon price remains high—that is as clear as mud. The Chancellor tinkered at the edges of the climate change levy, a policy introduced by Labour but undermined by his predecessor, George Osborne, who removed exemptions for renewable energy. The Government did announce a £315 million industrial energy transformation fund to support businesses to increase their energy-efficiency. That sounds good, but when we realise that it will be paid for entirely by money saved from scrapping capital allowances for energy and water efficiency, which enabled businesses to claim back the costs of investments, we see that it is really just rearranging the furniture.

What else was there? As has been said, the Government announced £20 million for nuclear fusion. I do not know whether the Chancellor’s understanding of nuclear fusion is as limited as his understanding of blockchain, but these figures should illustrate the challenge here: £20 million is 330 times smaller than the €6.6 billion the EU will contribute to one nuclear fusion experimental facility in France—this is not even a drop in the nuclear ocean. Of renewable energy—wind, solar and tidal—not a single mention was made, at a time when electricity and gas wholesale prices are rising, and we enter another winter with household bills surging and millions facing fuel poverty. There was £10 million for urban tree planting and a commitment to purchase £50 million-worth of carbon credits from tree planting, although it is unclear whether that is new funding. The lack of action on climate mitigations is disappointing.

John Howell: I think the hon. Lady’s figures on fusion technology are completely wrong, as she is not comparing like with like. The project in the south of France is a commercial project to make fusion possible at a commercial scale. That means that the projects continuing in the UK do not have to be at that scale, and the £20 million is an enormous contribution to what they are trying to do.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but in fact he illustrates the scale of the problem. Nuclear fusion requires significant investment...
in order to commercialise it, as he would agree. The level of investment that this Government are making in it is entirely inadequate to meet the challenge and in respect of the contribution fusion can make to our economic and climate future.

Labour is serious about achieving a net zero emissions economy before 2050. We are developing policies to dramatically decarbonise energy and insulate 4 million homes in our first term, as part of our green jobs revolution. We believe in the power of people, the power of leadership and the power of government to address what are frankly existential challenges. After eight years of austerity and counting, it is evident that the Tories have given up on this. This Budget shows the Tories giving up on the planet, too. They lack both ideas and the courage to do what is needed. They must step aside.

1.55 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chijn Onwurah), a fellow scientist, albeit some of her evidence could have perhaps benefited from a peer review. May I ask her, on behalf of the whole House, to pass on our best wishes to the Secretary of State for a speedy recovery—

Vicky Ford: Shadow Secretary of State—

Mr Davis: Shadow Secretary of State, yes. I do not think my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State requires any help in recovery. He is a formidable champion for business, as I know, sometimes to my cost, from my old job. He has been a brilliant exponent and driver of the enabling of the modernisation of the British industrial estate. I wish to pick up on one point made by the hon. Lady. She talked about the treatment of employees, the so-called “gig economy” and so on. My right hon. Friend was the one who brought us the Matthew Taylor report, with all of its innovative ideas to improve the protection of employees in our country and at the same time not destroy the jobs that they enjoy. That is pretty formidable in its own right, so I commend my right hon. Friend for that, although I do not intend to take us down that route today.

I have only three quick points to make. I shall be brisk and I probably will not take any interventions. Traditionally, the Budget is dominated by the technical metrics of growth rates, inflation rates, taxation, deficits, debt levels and spending. All those things are incredibly important issues. Indeed, one reason why it would be a disaster to have a Labour Government is that they would ignore all those things and deliver us into national bankruptcy, with the economic crisis and the social crisis that would follow. What is important is to understand that a Conservative Government do take all those things seriously, as they are the box in which we deliver the Budget. The Budget is about improving people’s lives and delivering the best outcome for our nation. As Conservatives, we believe in a narrative of a property owning democracy encompassing opportunity, personal responsibility, economic freedom, fairness and social mobility. For most of my colleagues, our view of the right sort of society for us is one where there is no limit to which anyone might rise and a limit beneath which no person may fall.

With that, I want to measure this Budget against the aspirations of our citizens: does it meet their aspirations to have a good university education; to get a job and build a meaningful career; to buy a home and raise a family? Those are aspirations that everyone shares, across the House and across the nation—we share them with all our constituents. Everyone should have the opportunity to pursue them.

All political parties talk a good story when they are trying to persuade people that they are on their side, but it is what Governments do, not what they say, that matters to the people. Nowhere is that more true than in the Budget; the language of public finance is the language of priorities, which is why this is so important. Starting with the definition of a decent society, both the ladder of opportunity and the social safety net are determined for the least well-off by the benefits system—by the welfare system. That is the key that underpins the opportunities and security for all the least well-off.

For decades, the British welfare system has been a nightmare of complexity in which hard work was in effect penalised, sometimes to the point of it being not worth while at all from an economic point of view, although work is always worth while from a moral point of view. The coalition Government started the necessary reform by introducing the universal credit system. Much has been said about it—it has been controversial—but the whole system is a significant step in the right direction.

The tax credits and benefits system introduced by Gordon Brown all too often trapped people in a cycle of dependency, which was not foreseeable. I was the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee when he introduced that system, which he copied from a system in America that was already failing, and it was clear what was going to happen. Many people who made the effort to go out and find work faced an effective tax and withdrawal rate of up to 95%.

A benefit system should seek to aid people’s return to work, not trap them in unemployment. Universal credit seeks to correct that problem by helping more people into work and enabling them to keep more of what they earn, but it absolutely has to be properly funded. I therefore welcome the most important part of the Chancellor’s Budget: his announcement on universal credit. We must make sure that those in most need, including single parents—those who know me will know that single parents are of particular importance to me—couples without children, and those who should not be economically dependent on their partners, are not left wanting by subsequent changes. Universal credit will need further funding beyond what is promised in the Budget, and I shall certainly watch out for that. Nevertheless, the Chancellor has taken excellent action, for which I commend him.

The next most important way to help people make the most of their lives is through education and training, which the Secretary of State has been a great exponent of in his role. However, today, the cost of getting a university education, plus the confusion around financing, act as a disincentive to getting one. I am afraid the policy on student loans has failed. Almost half the loans will never be repaid. They are a falsehood in the national accounts. Crucially, the loans system has failed to deliver a market in university education—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan
Reynolds) should not be smiling: Labour basically invented the system and created the problems that I am about to talk about.

The loans system has failed to deliver a market in university education, with the least valuable courses at the worst universities costing precisely the same as the most valuable course at the most prestigious university. That is not a market. At least some of the money has gone not into world-class research but into overpaying some pretty second-rate vice-chancellors. The whole system needs to be revamped and turned into a proper graduate-contribution system with honest accounting, clear rules and no retrospective changes to the interest rates or other terms. In the long run, we should move away from loans all together; that would have a liberating psychological impact on young people.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Davis: No, I will not give way on this issue.

Mr Jones: I wonder why.

Mr Davis: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman why I will not give way: because he was part of the Government who invented the system that created this crisis in the first place.

We need to do more on housing, which is an issue of utmost importance. Home ownership levels are plummeting, and many young people believe that they will never have a home to call their own. As a party of aspiration, we must do better. Help to Buy is failing: it is not increasing the supply of housing; rather, it is increasing the cost of new homes by 15% and inflating developers’ bonuses. It should be scrapped immediately. We need to increase the supply of new homes dramatically and to make those homes attractive and affordable. Perhaps the best idea that is being mooted—forgive me if I go off piste for a second, Mr Speaker—is that of garden towns, garden cities and garden villages. Garden villages of between 1,500 and 5,000 houses will be big enough to justify schools, shopping centres, buses and so on.

The landowners where such developments are created make spectacular windfall gains—in the south of England, they make as much as £1 million an acre—which is where the Treasury comes in. There is no reason why half of such gains should not be funnelled in a way that reduces the final price of the house. That way, when we create affordable housing, it will be proper affordable housing, of a decent size—it will not be a little box, a progressively shrinking option. That is how we will get the affordable houses that we need. However we do it, we in the Conservative party have to grasp this problem and solve it. This party has for more than 50 years been the party of the home owning democracy. We need once more to make home ownership available to a whole new generation.

Since the Gordon Brown crash—I was going to call it the 2008 crash—we have heard a lot about the threats to capitalism, which are of course real in, for example, the personality of the Leader of the Opposition. The simple truth is that free markets, free trade, property ownership and social mobility have delivered improvements to the lives of billions around the world. Capitalism has taken people not just in Britain but around the world out of poverty and given them a future. The best defence of capitalism in this country is to deliver those benefits to a new generation of young people. Britain is an aspirational country and we are an aspirational party; we need to deliver on that.

The first step is the economy’s fantastic jobs performance. The Opposition never like to speak about the fact that we have the lowest unemployment in my adult lifetime and the highest employment ever in this country. That is a remarkable achievement given the mess we were given when we came into office. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) intervened on the shadow Minister earlier to say that when Labour came into power in ’97, the debt was such and such, and so on. When Labour came into power in ’97, the chief economic adviser to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair said publicly, “This is the best economy any Government have ever inherited”—

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Mr Davis: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That attempt at an intervention came one sentence from the end of my speech, to which I shall simply add that it seems to me that some points of order are as bogus as the facts to which the right hon. Member for North Durham claims to aspire.

Throughout the past 50 years, Governments of all parties have made enormous claims for their intentions on social mobility, but in delivery they have fallen short on nearly all those claims. This shall be a Government who deliver on social mobility and on the real value of a capitalist economy. On that basis, I commend the Budget to the House.

2.7 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister promised to end austerity. The Chancellor said it is “coming to an end.” The Budget proved simply to be yet another rebranding exercise. The Tories are good at making promises, but they are bad at keeping them. The Resolution Foundation pointed out that, to end all spending cuts through all Departments by 2022-23, the Chancellor would need to spend £31 billion. Ten years after the financial crash,
nothing has changed. The Chancellor continues to balance
the books on the backs of the poorest in society. And
that is before we even consider the impact of Brexit,
which, incidentally, merited only a passing mention in
the Chancellor’s speech.

Household budgets face tougher times as Brexit goes
from holding the economy in its teeth to biting down
and spitting out those who can afford it the least. That
is not an outcome that we want to see for people in any
of the UK’s nations, but Scotland actively voted to
avoid it. That is why we in the Scottish National party
believe that the power over the future of the people of
Scotland should be in their hands, not in the hands of a
Government who are wilfully ignoring the wishes of the
Parliament in Scotland.

The way in which the Government are playing their
hand is making the case for independence for Scotland
for us, but let us see whether they can at least do a few
small things to make life a bit more bearable. We
welcome the freeze on whisky duty, a perennial call
from those on the SNP Benches, but the Government
must now commit to ruling out the use of geographical
indicators as a bargaining chip with the EU. Scotch
whisky must remain fully recognised everywhere.

With the costs of the movement of goods and people
facing increases owing to Brexit, the UK Government
must work with the Scottish Government to fix the
issues over the highlands and islands exemption and
allow the transfer of air passenger discount to Scotland
in a workable format. Incidentally, the Chancellor’s
Budget contained a veiled threat to allow for a dangerous
increase in that tax, which would further hit Scottish
travellers. The UK Government must also ensure that
EU funding will continue until the end of the current
multiannual financial framework and that Scotland must
not be worse off in any respect of those funding allocations.
Crucially, they must respect devolution.

Freezing fuel duty is also to be welcomed, but what is
not welcome is the freezing endured, especially by those
on remote isles in the highlands and islands, who still
get a red raw deal through higher electricity unit charges
and unregulated off-grid gas and heating oil. When will
they get fairness? When will they see the change that
they deserve and need?

Despite attempts to rebrand the message—the Chancellor
now calls austerity ‘“financial discipline”—after a decade,
Tory austerity is far from over. Instead it continues to
be more dogma and neglect. In contrast, the Scottish
Government are using their limited powers to build an
economy of the future with measures to unlock innovation
and drive increased productivity, and they would do
even more if they had the power to do so.

Scotland’s 2019-20 resource block grant is down nearly
7%, £2 billion in real terms, compared with the 2010-11
figure. That is even after the additional funding announced.
Even the £602 million headline increase fails to mention
the £53 million of existed budget.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) rose—

Drew Hendry: I will allow an intervention in a while,
but I must make some progress just now.

We have yet to see the refund of joint VAT due to the
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Police Scotland.
Where was the convergence uplift due to the Scottish
farmers? Some £160 million that should be spent in
Scotland was simply spirited away by Ministers for their
own projects.

Douglas Ross: Could I go back to the hon. Gentleman’s
point about the block grant? Does he agree that, between
this year and next, the block grant for Scotland is up
£866 million in cash terms and up £381 million in real
terms? How is that a cut?

Drew Hendry: What the hon. Gentleman fails to
understand is that, if you put £1 in but, because of the
rising cost, take £2 out, that is a cut effectively. What we
have seen is a real-terms cut—[Interruption.] I have to
educate him. That is what a real-terms cut means. As he
has raised that issue, let us highlight other real-term and
actual cuts that Scotland has endured: £400 million,
due through the previous regulatory agreement for railways;
the city deals are £387 million short of the match
funding that the Scottish Government put in; £53 million
is missing for the NHS from this Budget; and the VAT
for fire and rescue services and for Police Scotland, at
£175 million.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend has rightly pointed out that £175 million
has not been refunded to Scotland’s emergency services
through VAT. Does he agree that it is bewildering that
this money has not been refunded given that—
[Interruption.] The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire
and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) is chuntering from a
sedentary position. “You were told.” A special dispensation
on paying VAT was given to academy schools in England,
but not to Scotland’s emergency services.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes an excellent
point.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): When the figures for what Scotland has lost are totalled
up, agriculture VAT comes to £1.1 billion; and there is
the £1.9 billion cut from 2010. That is £3 billion in total.
When we look over the Irish sea, we see Ireland with its
7% growth in the last year alone. Ireland’s economy has
grown by £18 billion. The Irish are getting £4 billion
more in tax. What is the difference between Scotland
and Ireland? Ireland, which is independent, is £7 billion
ahead of Scotland with the Tories in Westminster. If
that is not a wake-up call, what is?

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for
making that point. He points out exactly where the
powers lie to make a real difference for people.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Drew Hendry: I will give way one last time.

Alison Thewliss: Is my hon. Friend as curious as I am
about the political influence on this Budget? Belfast has
received £2 million from this Government for a fire
fund, whereas Sauchiehall Street, which has suffered
two recent fires, has not had a single penny from this
Chancellor.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes the point succinctly
about the way Scotland is treated on these matters and I
thank her for that intervention.

This Government’s negligent actions have already
drained our economy of much-needed, vital investment.
The Chancellor failed to take the steps to support the
economy and businesses. The Fraser of Allander Institute
estimates that a hard Brexit could cost 80,000 jobs in Scotland between 2020 and 2030. Mark Carney told MPs in this building that Brexit has already cost households—families—up to £900 each. Again, there was no mention of that in the Budget. And we know why. The UK Government’s own figures have shown that there simply is no good Brexit, with a substantial hit to the economy, as a best-case scenario, running to a whopping 8% reduction in GDP. In context, that is a cost of £2,300 per person, per year by 2030. Even if the UK signs a free trade deal with the EU, Scotland’s GDP will be hit to the tune of £1,610 per person every year until 2030.

There was also a failure to support the oil and gas sector in the Budget. The UK Government have now taken more than £350 billion-worth of North sea revenues, and that is excluding, by the way, the supply chain, corporation, employment or business taxes, and we are supposed to cheer when the UK Government do nothing in their Budget for that industry, other than to float the idea of a tax increase and then say they are not imposing it, along with some vague verbal support for decommissioning. Where is the funding from the Secretary of State? Why has he not been arguing for the sector deal for oil and gas?

The Office for Budget Responsibility is stating that the outlook for oil and gas is showing a rise from £1.2 billion to £2.2 billion per year on average. Production statistics are up on 2014-15 levels by more than 23% and oil and gas sales values are up by nearly 20%. New fields such as Capercarville, Achmelvich and Nexen’s phase two in the Buzzard Field underline the remaining potential. A study at Aberdeen University suggests an extra 4 billion barrels of oil from offshore, on top of 2017 estimates, yet the sector is still ignored. [Interruption.] Some Conservative Members are chuntering that the Chancellor’s passing mention or the green UK was no mention of that in the Budget. And we know however: they are obsessed with new nuclear.

The Chancellor’s passing mention or the green UK Greens will not like that. Let me tell them that, unlike Conservative Members, we are not obsessed with new nuclear. We are obsessed with new renewables. The Government appear willing to pour unlimited amounts of public money into only one policy, of nuclear. That is pernicious. The Government should behave themselves, please.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Does my hon. Friend get as frustrated as I do when he listens to the litany of failures from Westminster and realises the sums of money involved?

Compare that with the sums of money following the growth in the Irish economy in the last year—£4 billion in extra tax revenue. They can do so much more with the powers of independence. We are shackled by the crew down here in Westminster, whose vision and imagination are so limited. All that they can do is cut and continue austerity. It is the same record at the same time—[Interruption.] Conservative Members should behave themselves, please.

Drew Hendry: I thank my colleague for making that point.

On the subject of new technologies, where was the serious investment in renewables research and development? According to Government answers, that sits at a paltry £51 million, which is a failure to commit to evolving technologies such as tidal, in which Scotland is a global leader. The Scottish Government have led the way in supporting tidal, and now the UK Government must work with them to explore where differentiation from the CfD—contracts for difference—process could be achieved to support this through to commercialisation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Drew Hendry: I shall let Members in, but I want to make some progress.

We need, and will need, oil and gas for our future heat while we transition to low and zero-carbon fuels, but meeting the Paris climate change targets means real investment in the technology to manage that switch. Anyone with an ounce of sense knows that carbon capture and storage is a vital component to achieve targets that are so important to us all.

The Secretary of State said earlier that he would not let the lead on technology slip, but where was that when the carbon capture and storage programme at Peterhead was abandoned? We had the opportunity to become world leaders, to demonstrate technological advancement and, crucially, to get a head start in the transition and to have marketable expertise and technology to export. Instead, three years ago, a £1 billion rug was pulled from underneath the industry, its companies and the people of Scotland. It was nothing short of betrayal.

Now the UK Government are back talking up carbon capture and storage, three years later. However, they say that they can catch up with only 10% of the original budget—which, incidentally, is the same amount that they squandered on the preparation work for Peterhead. You could not make this up. It is nothing more than lip service. With a will, however, the Government could sort this. There are still opportunities, including at Grangemouth, but the longer the wait, the more difficult and expensive it becomes, especially to man-made climate change. The Government must now fess up, about turn and push the pedal to the floor, properly fund the technology and at long last live up to the Paris commitments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Drew Hendry: I shall give way in a moment, because I did promise to, but it will have to be very brief. I want to come to a conclusion soon.

The solar industry has been battered by this Government, and now must be the time to reverse the plans to end the solar power export tariff for solar homes, small businesses and community energy projects. Ending that would be pernicious. The Government appear willing to pour unlimited amounts of public money into only one policy, however: they are obsessed with new nuclear.
Reports suggest that the Tory Government will pump £6 billion-worth of equity and about £9 billion of debt support into the failing Wylfa project, where project costs are trailed at about £20 billion. Both that and the huge white elephant that is Hinkley C have strike prices significantly higher than those for offshore wind. The National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee warnings about value for money must be acknowledged. The public will be paying for those projects for decades to come, through higher bills. There was nothing in this Budget for the victims of green deal mis-selling.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: Very briefly, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is keen to ask this Government what they are doing to do, but what are his Government doing to do about the historically slow growth rates in Scotland? Scotland is still growing 30% more slowly than the rest of the UK. Why is he not asking his own Government to deal with those issues?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman says nothing about productivity levels in Scotland, which continually outstrip those of the UK.

The Institute of Directors and the SNP made a demand for a small and medium-sized enterprises support line to help them deal with Brexit. The Chancellor also failed to deliver that. Meanwhile, in Scotland, the Scottish Government help business with a £96 million investment to deliver the most attractive business rates package throughout the nations of the UK. Already, more than 100,000 businesses in Scotland pay no rates at all through the small business bonus scheme. Significantly, the Scottish Government are setting aside resources of £340 million to provide capitalisation for the Scottish national investment bank.

I wanted to talk about much more, but I shall cut a lot out to aid the process today. Before I finish, however, I want to cover the fair treatment of workers. Westminster has failed to end wage discrimination and give young people the real living wage. Young people are used to being short-changed by this Tory Government, as are those whose rights are infringed by the gig economy and unpaid work trials. In the SNP, we believe that a fair day’s work should result in a fair day’s pay.

Contrast the Chancellor’s failure with the success of the Scottish Government’s real living wage accreditation scheme, which ensures that more than 1,000 employers now pay the real living wage and that, as a result, nearly 82% of workers in Scotland are earning it—the highest level in the nations of the UK. Imagine what more we could do if we had the power in Scotland to do so. In the meantime, the UK Government must stop ducking their responsibilities on pay. These measures are not only about doing the right and fair thing; they aid the economy by increasing productivity and boosting revenue through tax takes to spend on services. If the Government will not live up to their responsibilities for fair pay, fair conditions and young people, we should have the power in Scotland to do so ourselves.

I shall end on two things. First, in city deals around Scotland, the UK Government have fallen nearly £400 million short of the Scottish Government’s investment—so much for the 50:50 partnership. The Chancellor came up £50 million short on the Tay region deal and failed to confirm 100% coverage of Scotland, as promised by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—good at making promises, bad at keeping them. But of course that is nothing new. We saw that in the highlands with the Inverness and Highland city region deal, where the UK Government put in only about 20% of the funding—their £53 million dwarfed by the Scottish Government’s £135 million.

Healthy economies need healthy communities. This week’s Budget had one massive failure. That was the failure to deal effectively with the problem that is universal credit. It should have been halted, fixed and properly funded. Instead, like everything else, it only got lip service. After five and a half years, since the pilot to full roll-out in the highlands, we have seen the misery that people have had to endure. Despite all the begging, cajoling, demanding and asking of Government to listen, they failed to do so. They have made promises to people that they were unwilling to keep. It is about time that the Government took responsibility and sorted that out.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Michael Fallon, who is not subject to a formal time limit, but I know that his natural courtesy will make it quite inconceivable that he would wish to address the House for longer than seven minutes.

2.27 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am most grateful, Mr Speaker. I remind the House of the business interests declared in the register.

Unlike the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), I commend the Budget and I look forward to supporting it in the Lobby tomorrow. The Chancellor of course had the advantage of rising tax receipts and lower borrowing, and he has made his choices, but they have been good choices. I look forward to supporting them.

In the end, this Budget should be judged on how it meets some of the bigger challenges; on how it strengthens the resilience of our economy as quantitative easing comes to an end and capital might seek a more profitable home in the United States; on how it helps to narrow our still substantial productivity gap with France and Germany, as well as the United States—I commend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in particular for securing a massive increase in the investment allowance, which really will help our firms to start to narrow that gap; and on how it makes us properly match-fit for Brexit. I applaud the additional resources being given to UK Export Finance and the very significant increase in expenditure on research and development. It is in those areas that we are going to have to grow our capability if we are to succeed as a first-class global economy.

I would like to pick out three particular areas that I think require more attention. The first is infrastructure. Again, I was delighted to see a really significant increase in the roads budget. However, the recent proposal to take an entire motorway in my constituency and turn it into a potential lorry park illustrates just how fragile our roads system is if it can choke up so easily.
It is noteworthy that the three most important wealth-creating regions of our country—the south-east, London and East Anglia—are divided by the Thames. There are 17 bridges in London west of Tower Bridge; there are only two road crossings east of it. Every day, my constituents and thousands of others in Kent and in Essex, on both sides of London, are queuing to get over the River Thames, at untold cost to our economy and our business. That is because successive Governments have been ludicrously slow in giving us the infrastructure we need. It took 70 years to add a second tunnel at Blackwall and 28 years to add a bridge to the Dartford tunnel, and it now looks like taking 18 years to build the third lower Thames crossing. I urge my right hon. Friends to look again at the infrastructure bureaucracy to see how we can speed up the development of the critical infrastructure that we are going to need in future—the airports, the ports and the river crossings that will enable us to make a success of Brexit.

Secondly, there is investment in our schools and skills. I fully understand that education spending for the next spending period will not be determined until the spring, but I think my right hon. Friends are already aware that school budgets are struggling to cope at the moment, with rising pupil numbers and the huge increase in the number of pupils with additional needs, meaning that education authorities such as Kent County Council are continuing to have to divert resources from the main schools funding block to deal with these particular pupils. I do not think I am alone in this House in urging my right hon. Friends to look again at the schools budget, not just for 2021 but for the new financial year for schools beginning in September.

My final point is on savings. The current savings ratio, at 4.9% of disposable income, is the lowest for 50 years. It has been falling year after year and is now the lowest since records began. Coupled with some of the steep recent increases in consumer debt, that should set alarm bells ringing. I am quite struck by the number of constituents I see in my surgeries who are living on the edge, if I can put it like that—who have nothing to fall back on when they hit harder times. We have to return to that in future Budgets.

One of the more painless ways of boosting savings, of course, is to encourage share ownership—not through the mandatory, confiscatory plan put forward by the shadow Chancellor, but by simplifying and incentivising the current share schemes. There are share incentive plans at the moment, but some of them are 40 pages long. There are employee ownership trusts, but they do not apply to companies owned by private equity. We need to look again at all this to simplify it so that it is easier for employees to have a genuine stake in their firms. We must reduce the holding period and improve the tax treatment so that we have genuine share ownership.

With Brexit looming, one might have expected a Budget that was a holding operation. This was much more than a holding operation; it was a very skilful set of choices. But outside the European Union, I believe, we are going to need even more ambition as a Government. We will need further, radical steps to improve our tax competitiveness, to improve our export record, to drive up our productivity, to modernise our infrastructure, and to improve the quality and quantity of our spending on skills and on schools. That said, I commend this Budget.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a large number of Members want to contribute to this debate, so I am imposing a five-minute time limit on speeches.

2.34 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This Budget has shown that the Government’s contention that austerity is over is not correct. Austerity is not over, and it runs deep throughout this Budget.

I want to start in the local sense, for me, with the north Wales growth deal. For the past three years the Government have promised a growth deal for north Wales, and that has been put in the Red Book, but no money has been delivered. This Budget has delivered a figure of £120 million for the north Wales growth deal. I give that a cautious welcome initially. It will help with the purchase of land and the development of business; with transport and with infrastructure; and with the digital activity—connectivity in terms of a range of issues—that we want to see in north Wales.

Despite that cautious welcome, there are still some challenges with the growth deal. North Wales remains overwhelmed at the amount of resource that is being put towards the deal. On receiving the announcement, the Assembly’s Finance Secretary, Mark Drakeford, said that it falls “some way short of what we and the people of north Wales have been expecting and working hard towards”.

A business leader in north Wales, Askar Sheibani, who is the chairman of the Deeside business forum and the managing director of a major technical company, has said that this deal will leave the people of north Wales angry: “We were expecting a lot more than that”.

The work that has been done by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), by Assembly Members, by local government and by business means that we should have received, potentially, £340 million. There have been meetings with the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies); I can see Ministers on the Treasury Bench looking closely at what has been said.

We want to know, from a north Wales perspective, what deals have been done with local government to date, what assurances we have got for the National Assembly about match funding for this money, what support we have got for businesses, and what projects, and when, will be put on the ground in the near future with the £120 million. We have come a long way to date, and there has been a lot of co-operation, but we need more support for the future. The cautious welcome will have to remain cautious until we get answers to those questions.

I said that austerity is not over, and it is clear from the Red Book that it is not. Let us look at some of the figures in the Red Book. Let us take, for example, the Home Office. This year’s budget is £10.8 billion; the 2019-20 budget is £10.7 billion. This is at a time when police officer numbers have been cut by 21,000 from when I
had the honour of being Policing Minister in 2010; when as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) has pointed out, only today the National Police Chiefs Council is potentially taking the Government to court over £165 million-worth of investment on pensions; and when shoplifting is up by 4%, robbery is up by 11%, theft is up by 6%, violence is up by 13%, and sexual offences are up by 46%. The Government are going to fall back on local taxpayers, yet again, to bail out the funding for policing. The Government themselves should be funding policing.

For the Ministry for Justice, this year’s figure is £6.3 billion and next year’s figure is £6 billion. That is a £300 million reduction in expenditure at a time when prison officers are under stress and attacks on prisoners are increasing—when there is a real challenge in the prison system. For the International Trade Department, at a time when we have the uncertainties that are facing us with Brexit, there is a cut of 25%—not much optimism about doing trade deals there.

Throughout the position set out in the Red Book, there are deep cuts in a range of key budget areas. This is at a time when the Government are also ensuring that almost half of the income tax cuts in the Budget are going to the top 10% of households, and when three quarters of the £12 billion welfare cuts—including the changes announced which are not really going to meet the problems of universal credit—remain Government policy from the 2015 election. Nobody begrudges a tax cut to middle-income doctors, nurses and police professionals, but yet again the Government have not raised the 40% tax rate to 45%. They have cut the bank levy from £2.6 billion to £1.1 billion. They are going to raise £32 billion from council tax this year but £40 billion in three years’ time. They are going to transfer the responsibility for funding to people on the ground rather than having central Government funding.

There are some things to welcome in this Budget, but austerity is still present, hurting my constituents’ incomes and the public services they depend on.

2.39 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Budgets provide the Government of the day with the opportunity to demonstrate their vision and long-term ambitions and aspirations for the economy, the citizens of our country and our communities and businesses. As the noble Lord Lawson, the former Chancellor, frequently said in his time in government, to govern is to choose. Setting a Budget is about exactly that—making responsible choices and decisions in the long-term national economic interest. Several Members have touched on some of the commendable steps taken, so my remarks will focus on where we have more to do.

In particular, we need to focus on the strong and unyielding case, particularly given what we hear from the Opposition Benches, for economic liberalisation and long-term monetary and fiscal competence. That includes the promotion of economic freedoms, led by pioneering policies on tax reform and simplification of the tax system—for example, by integrating income tax and national insurance into a single tax, to reduce complexity and bring parity between the employed and the self-employed. That would enable the Government to lower the tax burden further, so that people can keep more of the money they earn.

We have heard about home ownership. We need reform of property taxes, including stamp duty, to promote and support home ownership. We need to provide tax freedoms for local councils, so that they can compete and become engines of regional economic growth and competition, rather than centralise regional and local spending decisions in Whitehall, as we have seen for decade after decade.

We need to support our communities through a devolution revolution, so that regional leaders and organisations—ranging from business organisations such as the Essex chambers of commerce in my constituency and restructured business-facing local enterprise partnerships with a remit more relevant to their geography—are empowered to do more on economic growth. We must empower our police, fire and crime commissioners and regional transport boards to deliver the lower Thames crossing and enhance road improvements across our constituencies and our region. We must give those regional leaders the ability to deliver for people, communities and businesses.

We need to focus on outcomes, such as more police through localised budgets and accountable local police leadership; support for new economic corridors, such as the A12 in my constituency and the A120—essential roads that need investment if we are going to continue to meet the growing demands of the regional and national economy; and localising skills provision, which we do not speak about enough, so that it is led by businesses and not bureaucratic local government schemes that often replicate some of the unproductive aspects of Whitehall government.

On top of that, we cannot be complacent with the economy, which means the public finances as well, either now or in the long term. We are still borrowing large amounts of money each year, and deficit reduction must remain a core part of sound financial management. National debt now exceeds £1.8 trillion, which is the equivalent of 83% of our GDP.

As we look to the future, alongside a long-term ambition for the British economy, we need a long-term plan which demonstrates that the UK will have many opportunities for economic growth and progress once we leave the European Union. That means Brexit being accompanied by radically pro-growth, pro-enterprise economic policies that liberalise and empower not only communities but businesses and new industries to flourish and grow in the United Kingdom. We are competing with some of the brightest and the best in the world, and we now see an emerging middle class in some of the fastest growing non-western economies supplanting the established western middle class as the engine of economic growth across the world.

We need to focus much more on not only the short-term but the long-term policies that unleash our potential to grow and thrive. As Conservatives, that means promoting economic liberty, trust in people and local decision makers, addressing gaps in prosperity by boosting economic freedoms and applying fiscal discipline, so that we can give the British and the British people a fair chance, through their own efforts, of economic security for themselves and their families, which this Budget goes some way to doing.
2.44 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her conference speech that this was the end of austerity. The Chancellor had an opportunity on Monday to make that a reality, but it did not happen.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy relied on the usual Conservative mantra, which is that austerity is all Labour’s fault. I remind Conservative Members that up until 2007, they did not complain about our spending; they said that they would match it. In some areas, they wanted more expenditure. They wanted less regulation of banks, not more. If we had done what the Conservatives suggested we did with the banks when they crashed, we would be in a worse state now. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) is correct: the economy was growing in 2010. It was the reckless emergency Budget in 2010 by the incoming coalition Government that crashed the economy, and it is that austerity we are suffering from now.

The Secretary of State said that Labour is anti-business. I am not anti-business. Business is very important for my constituents and the health of the economy, but strong local government and strong communities are also important for that. The Government have a role in ensuring that we have economic prosperity.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, austerity clearly has not finished in the Home Office, and it has not finished in local government. The one-off proposals show that Durham County Council, which has lost £200 million in grant over the past eight years, will lose another £14 million next year, because the revenue support grant has not been changed. There is no change—communities and councils up and down the country will still face austerity, so the idea that austerity has somehow finished in this country is complete nonsense.

On strong local communities, I welcome the commitment in the Budget to £2 billion for mental health, but the Government have got it wrong, because the investment needs to go into local community services. We do not want people to get to A&E. It is great having a psychiatric nurse or professional in A&E, but we have failed if people get there in the first place. Likewise, I welcome the proposal to put mental health workers in schools, but many of the young people we are talking about do not attend school. We need investment in local communities’ support network.

We must also ensure that we have the mental health professionals in place, because there is a crisis with them that we need to address. That is where the money needs to go. We need to hardwire mental health into Government policy making and not have this ridiculous situation where policies such as cuts to local authorities and universal credit lead to a mental health crisis. We need to address the core problem, and this Budget is not doing it.

I want to briefly touch on defence, which Members will know is another one of my interests. Great play has been made of the extra £1 billion for defence, but we must remember that in the past eight years, the coalition and Conservative Governments have cut 16% of the defence budget. I asked yesterday what the extra £1 billion will be spent on, but the Government cannot say. I suspect that it is not new money, but rather drawdown from the money already committed for the nuclear deterrent, so this will not be a bonanza for defence and will not meet the £20 billion black hole in the defence budget.

Likewise, I welcome the fact that the Chancellor announced £10 million for the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to support veterans’ mental health, but is that new money or existing money? If we look at the covenant report, there is already £10 million in that budget annually. If there is an extra £10 million, that is good, but we do not need a sticking plaster. We need to mainstream veterans’ mental health in the health service and do what I suggested in 2010, which is to ensure that we have veterans’ tracking in the health service. We announced that in 2010, and the first thing the coalition Government did was to stop it and not replace it.

This Budget is a missed opportunity. Communities are going to suffer, and if we get what we have had from this Conservative Government in the past few years, even where there is extra money, it will be doled out like a pork barrel to areas that support the Conservatives. Other areas that they do not really care about will get nothing. We only need to look at the north-east to see that that strategy is continuing with this Budget, and it is an absolute disgrace.

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2.49 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): There is a lot to praise in this Budget. I and my constituents particularly welcome the confirmation of the additional funding for the NHS and the additional money for social care, infrastructure, broadband, schools and defence, as well as of course the changes to business rates. I appreciate the fact that the Chancellor acknowledged my own representations on VAT, and given that I have 107 pubs in my constituency—about 35 more than the average—I particularly welcome the freeze on beer and spirits duty, as do my constituents.

The fact that the Chancellor was able to do all these things, announcing about £100 billion of additional spending over a five-year period, without increasing taxes—in fact, reducing them—is a remarkable achievement, and he deserves considerable praise. Although my constituents have been telling me for months—in fact, for years—that if it was necessary to increase tax, they would be willing for that to happen, I am glad that it has not happened.

This is not just about the total amount of money being spent; it is about where and how it is spent. I believe we have considerable further work to do on this, because if the money is not spent in a balanced way, areas of the country suffer. My area of the country is not getting its fair share of public expenditure. We are now seeing this in the fact that my constituency was ranked 522nd out of 533 in the latest social mobility index by constituency.

One key is education and education funding. There are few more important things in politics than enabling our children to reach their full potential, and education is the key route to doing so. It is my personal ambition to focus on that in Parliament. I am from a relatively modestive background. My dad—my Labour-voting, trade unionist dad, by the way—worked in a factory and my Mum was on the tills at Asda, and I went to a comprehensive school. I was the first person from my
school to go to Oxford, and the first person in my family to go to university. Social mobility is therefore key for me, and it is very important.

We know that education is not all about money, but it plays such an important role. It is no accident that the top-funded places in the country—they are mainly in London—also have the highest social mobility and, conversely, that the lowest funded areas are the lowest for social mobility. There is clearly a strong link. In my constituency, average funding for secondary schools is £4,875. It is one of the lowest figures in the country, and it is £500 below the average school. It is also £3,000 per pupil per year less than in Hackney and £2,000 per pupil per year less than in Islington. Yet average incomes in my constituency, at £404, are £39 below the national average. That is also £150 less than in the shadow Home Secretary’s constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington, so this is not just related to income.

This is unfair, and I am glad that the Government are taking action and, with the fairer funding formula, ensuring that we will make changes. I applauded the fact that we will do so as fast and in as easy a way as we can, and like my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who is no longer in his place, I support significant increases in education funding. If that means increases in tax, I will support that and my constituents will support it. It is that important.

My area of Worcestershire is also suffering in other ways, such as in clinical commissioning group spending.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves away from education, does he agree that one of the key pressures on mainstream schools is that local authorities are seeking to take from mainstream schools to fund high needs, because of the burgeoning complexities in such areas? That is a very important pressure on our schools.

Nigel Huddleston: I agree completely. In fact, one of the main reasons why social mobility is such a challenge in my constituency is that there are a disproportionately high special needs. There is also a disproportionately high number of children with English as a second language. All these things require more attention, and they are causing genuine pressure on budgets.

I was mentioning NHS spending. The average CCG spending is £1,254, but the figure in Worcestershire is £1,138. There are areas of the country where average spending per person is up to £1,670. Again, my constituents are losing out to the tune of £500 per person per year vis-à-vis other areas. I do not resent the fact that other areas of the country are getting considerably more public expenditure than my constituents; I am just very jealous, and I want to make sure that my constituents get their fair share.

On infrastructure, whether broadband or road building, the midlands in particular—the area I represent—is underfunded compared with London and the south-east, which get so much funding. I am glad to see that that will change. There are announcements in the Budget for considerable increases in transport infrastructure spend. For example, I hope that the A46 will benefit.

I do not want to give the impression that it is all doom and gloom in my constituency, because it is frequently mentioned, after all, as one of the most desirable places in the country in which to live. It is obviously not because we are overfunded through public expenditure, but because the people in my constituency work hard. They are self-reliant, and if there is a problem, they look first in the mirror and try to resolve it themselves. It is unfair if my constituents have to delve into their own pockets to pay for things that are provided in other parts of the country through public expenditure. We need a balance, and a rebalancing, in where public money goes. In conclusion, I am arguing today not for special treatment for my constituents, but for fair and equal treatment, which I will do everything I can to deliver.

2.55 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister declared austerity to be over and the Chancellor downgraded the prediction to say that it is coming to an end, but the reality is that each Department is having to make 3% cuts, which hardly backs up those statements. Of course, the corporate giants will still enjoy their £110 billion corporate tax giveaway, while 1,000 people have seen their personal wealth increase by £274 billion over the past five years. For my constituents and many like them up and down the country, the harsh reality of services slashed and under increasing pressure and the daily experience of living in poverty or just scraping by was not addressed by this Budget. We all know that the money is going to the wrong places, and it will take a radical Labour Government to restructure and transform our economy to make sure that we invest in people’s future.

I want to turn to the high streets. On 8 March 2017, resulting from the valuation process and the sharp rises in business rates, we were promised a full business rates review, but it has not happened. Instead, temporary relief schemes have been provided to local authorities, badly managed by local authorities and then withdrawn.

We did not hear on Monday about how all the temporary relief has been withdrawn from small businesses. That has had an impact on pubs, which are losing £1,000, and on other small businesses, as well as medium-sized businesses—the anchors of our high streets—which will not be eligible for the one third reduction in their business rates. Again, this will have a massive impact on our high streets, but we did not hear about that from the Chancellor on Monday.

The announcement on business rates was again a short-term one—just two years. All such funding is so short-term; it is about the crisis management of our high streets, although businesses have to sign long—10-year—leases. They cannot make such long-term investments if the Government do not back them up. We are still seeing the inequality between our high streets and the out-of-town retail sector and between our high streets and online shopping, and they were not properly addressed either. Plasters were thrown out last year and bandages this year, but what we need is surgery—with real reform taking place—on our business rates system. I will not give up until we get real reform.

We need to address the causation of this problem, about which I have yet to hear from this Government. We have investors—mainly offshore investors—owning properties on our high streets, and while the revenue they get from tenants is helpful, it is pocket money compared with the scale of their investments in pension schemes and other investments. That has not been
tackled, and until it is, we will continue to have a crisis on our high streets. The escalation in rental values in places such as York is extortionate. The Government are providing relief for such corporate greed, but we need to address the greed where it sits. We are seeing the creation of a bubble on our high streets, and when it bursts, there will be a real collapse. I therefore urge the Chancellor to address the real problem of business rates.

I want to highlight the suggestions that have been made about a turnover or profit-based tax, which is far fairer and will create the greater equality that we need. I want to mention one of my streets, Coney Street, in York. We have about 50 empty properties in York, and want to mention one of my streets, Coney Street, in York. We have about 50 empty properties in York, and footfall in Coney Street fell by 9.3% on the previous year and by 15% in the past two years. That is just short of 27,000 fewer shoppers.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am sorry, but I do not have time to give way. The hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to put in to speak in the debate.

Since September 2016, there has been real decline on Coney Street: this year alone, 12 stores have closed. Unbelievably, that—a place where there is no traffic—is where the WH Smith that is meant to be hosting the new post office is based. The current post office, on a prime site in Lendal—the busiest thoroughfare of our city—is to close. It has been there since 1884. That is the most perverse decision, and I urge the Business Secretary, who is listening, to consider the case of York and reverse that decision so that we can have a vibrant post office, rather than losing that public service in a good place on our high streets. Yet another year passes. The Government are ducking the real challenges on our high streets. We need a Labour Government to revive our high streets and communities.

3 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I rise to support the Budget, which comes at an important time in the history of our country, when we need to develop policies fit to face future challenges. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is no longer in his place, that we should judge the Budget on whether it delivers practically for people, businesses and families across the country, including in my community. That is how we should judge what the Chancellor brought forward.

I want to highlight three areas on which the Budget delivers for my communities. In the end, individuals, businesses and communities are there to look for solutions, and the Government are there to help. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced significant help on business rates for high streets. In Halesowen and in the Rowley Regis area of my constituency—Blackheath, Cradley Heath and Old Hill—people are very attached to their local high streets. People in Halesowen’s business improvement district are working very hard to make it a more attractive place to do business and to encourage footfall. Those people working hard in my community have the real solutions. The Government can help, as the Chancellor has through his announcement of the measures on business rates. That is a positive measure for people in my community.

The second aspect that I wanted to highlight was the new investment in the national health service, in particular around mental health. I have been campaigning about the issue for many years. It is important because it is not just a philosophical principle—that there should be parity of esteem between mental and physical health in the national health service—but it actually helps people in my community lead more resilient lives and makes their lives more fulfilling. That is why we need to invest more money in mental health.

We have the opportunity to find community solutions to the increased prevalence of mental health issues. We must find ways for schools, local authorities and people in my community to collaborate and come up with solutions and help for people suffering from mental health problems, so that they can recover and lead fulfilling lives. That is why the issue is important—it is one of the biggest health challenges we will face over the next 20 or 30 years.

Economies grow only because of the work of people who want to start and develop businesses. Those people create jobs. One of the great success stories of the last few years has been the number of businesses that have started in this country. They are creating jobs in my constituency—people who get up in the morning, improve their lives and provide jobs and opportunities for people. The Budget is there to help people achieve those goals.

The increase in the annual capital allowance—encouraging investment, encouraging people to plan for the long term—helps those people. However, in the end it is the business people—the individuals, the entrepreneurs—who will drive our economy forward as we look to the future post Brexit. They will be the lifeblood of our economy. The Government can play a role, but they do not have all the solutions. The solutions are in the hands of ordinary people. But the Government, through some of the measures in the Budget, can help by providing practical solutions.

The Budget was a series of practical measures that will help people in my constituency and around the country by investing in our health service and helping the high street, which is facing real challenges. It is individuals and communities, working with the Government, who will solve some of those problems. The Government are encouraging business investment, investing in research and development for the future and supporting our businesses so that we can start to think of the future and build on the foundations that we have developed in government. In that way, we will build a country that can face up to the challenges and really take advantage of the opportunities out there in the world.

3.5 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): After eight years of austerity, people in St Helens are today, more than ever, feeling the effects of the swingeing cuts to our schools, our police, our NHS and our local government services. I am afraid to say that nothing announced in this Budget by the Chancellor can undo the impact that those cuts have had on our community and families right across the borough that I represent.

St Helens Council will have lost 71% of its central Government funding by 2020—the equivalent of over £500 for every man, woman and child in our borough.
It is just short of two years’ worth of the entire social care budget at a time when almost 5,000 adults in the borough are in need of long-term care and almost 2,000 children are in care or need some form of long-term protection. Meanwhile, the number of residents over the age of 90 is set to triple in the next 20 years and the number of those with dementia is set to increase by almost 60% in the next decade.

Unbelievably, the Chancellor said that he was announcing a “funding bonus” for schools to help with the “little extras”. Does he think that teachers and books are “little extras”? Those are what local schools tell me they cannot afford. There have been funding reductions of nearly £400 per pupil in my constituency, equivalent to over 200 teaching posts gone. This Friday, I am attending an emergency meeting at an outstanding primary school to see how we are going to address its deficit of £90,000 this year and £200,000 next year. Listening to those on the Government Benches, it seems that pupils, parents and teachers should be grateful for the £10,000 for the “little extras”.

Although I welcome the Government’s new found interest in renewing our high streets, I will be seeking clarity about how much of that is new money, and how much will be allocated to towns like St Helens and Newton-le-Willows. There must also be clarity from the Government about who is going to pay—it should be Whitehall, not the town hall.

Over the past eight years, the Government have taken billions of pounds from our public services and from the pockets of working people. St Helens and places like it have been disproportionately burdened with those cuts and a reduction in wages and living standards. If the Budget means that even the smallest fraction of some of the money taken is being returned, the Government can rest assured that I will be holding them to account and fighting to make sure that my community gets its fair share.

It is a tough time. There is a lot of uncertainty around Brexit: funding from the European Union has driven regeneration in some of the most deprived communities in Merseyside, but now we face the prospect of north-west economic growth slowing by 12%. In any scenario, my community will be poorer. I want to be clear: I did not come into politics to do anything that would make my constituents poorer, and I am not going to do it now. I accept that we are leaving the European Union, but I do not accept that in doing so we willfully cause an economic catastrophe that will have a devastating impact on communities and business in the constituency that I represent and cause people who live there untold hardship.

Despite the challenges, we are ambitious. We are home to one of the best and largest chambers of commerce in the country. Our Ambassador programme brings together business leaders from right across the borough. The company Communications Plus in Rainford has won a Queen’s Award for Enterprise. ATG Access, its products made in St Helens, is at this very moment protecting us in this building and protecting many iconic buildings across the world. We have just had an international pharmaceutical company relocate, creating 200 jobs. The Liverpool city region, under Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram, is investing in our infrastructure, with a new station at Newton-le-Willows and new road improvements at Windle Island. In sport, we will be a host venue for the Rugby League world cup. Most excitingly, 25 years after a Tory Government closed Parkside colliery in my constituency, we are on the shortlist to be the UK centre for a world-leading train manufacturer and for it to locate its business here. We are also achieving investment and working hard to be a nationally recognised centre for arts and culture. We have a music board, created by UK Music, to help to enhance the £135 million that music already contributes to our regional economy.

To conclude, the community I represent is resilient. It got through the ravages of deindustrialisation under a previous Tory Government. It will survive austerity and it will get through Brexit. Its civic, community and business leaders are proud of its past and ambitious for its future, but we need and we demand the tools from Government. If we have them, there is no limit to what we can achieve.
we would much rather they discharged themselves in public loos. So we are delighted about this measure, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I look around my high street and I see that the majority of businesses are small businesses. They are the lifeblood of the North Cornwall economy. Some 90% of those businesses will benefit from the reductions in small business taxation. One business wrote to me today: Lindsay from Linterior Design in Wadebridge told me that she has just expanded her business. The extra money from the rates cut will enable her to refurbish her business, putting some of her hard-earned money back into it. Real people with real businesses on the high street are saying that these are the real issues that affect them. The reform of the business rate shows how the Government have found a way to support enterprise and individuals in a fair way. Coupled with the tax on internet giants who gross £500 billion a year globally, this shows that the Chancellor has the best interests of small and independent stores at the heart of government.

I am very pleased about that.

It was not mentioned at the Dispatch Box, but my colleagues and I in Cornwall care passionately about fairness on the second homes issue. We have been campaigning on this issue with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers. It appears that some people soft let their second homes, paying neither council tax nor business rates. I was pleased to see in the Red Book that this is being reviewed. I represent an area with a number of second homes and I receive a lot of correspondence about it. It is important that everybody pays their fair share, so I am pleased that the Government are reviewing that particular policy.

We have been lobbying on it for quite some time.

I was delighted by the announcement on single-use plastics. I represent a coastal constituency. Several groups, including the Polzeath Marine Conservation Society, Surfers against Sewage and the Bude Cleaner Seas project, have written to me about single-use plastics. The announcement was good, but I think we can go further on some environmental measures. I will mention my favourite Waters Bill here, because the Government should consider the issue of sewage going into the sea. I understand that this is a matter not for the Treasury, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We find ourselves in a position where water companies are polluting the sea and that is just not right. I hope we can give further consideration to this issue at a later date.

On fisheries, I am delighted that £12 million will be dedicated to the fisheries industry. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has campaigned tirelessly to get transponders on smaller vessels, so I am delighted that £2 million of the fund will go to that. There will be £10 million for tech and innovation in the fisheries industry. We have not seen tech innovation in the industry for quite some time. It will enable us to fish in a more environmentally sustainable way.

On manifesto commitments, I am delighted that we are bringing forward big, macro policies on lifting thresholds. I represent an area where many people have modest incomes. They will see that money reinvested back into society. I am delighted with the Budget and will be supporting it in the coming days.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I will start by setting the record straight: the economic crisis happened in the United States. It started with Lehman Brothers and the US housing market. For the information of those on the Government Benches, George Osborne only a couple of months ago said it was not Gordon Brown’s fault. If the Labour Government had not taken the measures they did, most of those on the Government Benches would be sleeping rough tonight because their pensions and incomes would have all gone. They may want to ponder that when they make all sorts of allegations about the previous Labour Government.

I note that there has been no reference, certainly from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to any discussions he may have had about fracking. People are concerned about the consequences of fracking, so I hope that when the Minister winds up he will tell us where the Government actually stand on it. To say the least, there has been quite a lot of public disquiet. I also note that, as far as I could see, there was no reference in the Budget to a social housing programme. What I mean by that is council housing. The only way we can deal with the housing crisis is through proper social housing at affordable rents. In my experience, only local authorities can do that. I spent 22 years on a local authority, so I do have some experience of that.

Since their party conference, the Government have repeatedly said that the end of austerity is coming. I did not see that in the Budget. As expected, the Government have failed to live up to that promise. The end of austerity will come only when the Government increase funding across the board. This Budget does not give the police, schools, hospitals or local councils the money they badly need and for years have been denuded of.

Another issue I did not hear mentioned in the Budget was that of WASPI women and women born in the 1950s. WASPI women took the chance to express their disappointment a couple of days ago in the Public Gallery, so we have a good idea what they are feeling. These women have had sharp rises in income poverty, with their average weekly income falling by £32. The IFS put the gain to the Treasury from the rise in pension age at £5.1 billion per year since 2010, saving it £40 billion. Frankly, the Treasury can afford to pay them. Despite that, the Government have offered nothing to the 5 million people waiting longer for their pensions. It is no wonder then that the WASPI women are angry and are demonstrating on the streets.

The Chancellor was forced to increase universal credit funding amid Department for Work and Pensions mismanagement. We still do not know what the Government are going to do about that. Providing £1 billion of extra money over five years will make a difference, but not much to those losing out. Some 3.2 million families will lose £48 a week on average; the new funding means an extra £1.20 a week. Higher work allowances reduce losses for some, but the Government must fund universal credit properly or abandon it. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said, the Government are still not adequately funding universal credit. They cannot keep delaying its roll-out forever.

The Budget gives schools a one-off bonus of £400 million to help to buy the “little extras” that the Chancellor referred to.
Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is utterly shameful that the Budget aims to claw back £700 million from the self-employed by reforming off-payroll working, yet only £400 million from the tech giants, which have avoided an astonishing £5 billion-worth of tax over the last five years?

Mr Cunningham: I agree, but I point out to my hon. Friend that between 4 million and 5 million people earn poverty wages in this country, which demonstrates that work does not pay under this Government.

To turn back to education, the bonus averages out at £10,000 per primary school and £50,000 per secondary school—around £50 per pupil. If we think about that, the Government took £4.5 billion out of education, then put £1.5 billion back, so they still owe over £3 billion. Analysis suggests that schools in Coventry have faced almost a £300 cut to funding per pupil since 2014, so a £50 one-off payment per pupil is a drop in the ocean—barely enough to buy two new textbooks. Schools do not need small change or “little extras”; they need funding to rehire special educational needs senior assistants, to re-offer dropped subjects and to fund teacher pay increases fully.

As hon. Members all know, Coventry will be the city of culture and while I welcome the £8.5 million for that, the Government still have not given us the same amount of money that they gave Hull—in fact, it is nearly half. The city centre will benefit hugely, and it will also benefit from cuts to business rates for smaller businesses. However, as I said, the £8.5 million is below the £14 million that was given to Hull for 2017. I will work closely with my colleagues in Coventry City Council. Coventry must receive its fair share of funding to help to make the most of the city of culture opportunity.

3.22 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and to make a short contribution to the debate. I was very lucky to attend one of the best state secondary schools in the country. I was taught by inspirational teachers, and I remember two in particular today. My history teacher said, “Remember that there are myths and rewriting of history.” As I listen to Labour Front Benchers today, I note that their economic history is certainly being rewritten.

I was also reminded of my English teacher, who taught us that the great Shakespearean themes are appearance and reality. For many, the appearance of Wimbledon is that it is a leafy suburb where we play a bit of tennis and not much else happens, but the reality is rather different. Like so many places up and down the country, there will be rejoicing on the high streets of Wimbledon Park, Raynes Park and Motspur Park at the news on business rates. High streets and local high streets are at the heart of our community, whether people live in a suburb such as Wimbledon, a smaller town or a rural area, and this is to be welcomed.

Faisal Rashid: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in welcoming the Chancellor’s decision to use the Budget to show its support for Labour’s plan for Government by taking on board our long-standing policy to take action to support ailing high streets?

Stephen Hammond: The Labour party had 13 years to enact support for the high streets; this Government and this Chancellor are doing it. Therefore, I will concentrate on what is happening here and now and not on something that will not happen. Labour has not been elected to Government.

The reality of Wimbledon is also that we are a high-performing, small, high-tech, entrepreneurial, start-up suburb, and there is much in this Budget that will be extraordinarily helpful to those firms. The annual increase in the investment allowance will undoubtedly start to provide the certainty and encouragement that businesses need. The commitment to reviewing the taxation of intangible fixed assets and the reduction in the capital allowances special rate are going to start to stimulate the investment that this economy needs, has seen and will continue to see.

Many high-tech businesses are mobile. This means that for many, the choice of where people are located is not just between Wimbledon and anywhere in the UK, but between the UK and anywhere else in the world. A Budget that supports digital infrastructure and high-tech companies is to be welcomed. If a modern industrial strategy is to mean anything, it needs to mean that we support the industries of the future as well as the industries of the past. This is what the Budget does.

It is equally invaluable that we have high-quality infrastructure, whether physical or virtual, and measures in the Budget show the Government’s ambition. The extension of the national productivity investment fund provides the bedrock for those improvements to 2023-24. That is combined with extra funding for broadband, the transforming cities fund and the industrial strategy fund, in which there is £100 million for Made Smarter. That is going to transform hugely manufacturing in digital technologies. I am delighted that that has happened, and I was fortunate recently to visit Print City at Manchester Metropolitan University. This will be one of the industries of the future.

The industrial strategy, however, is not just about physical infrastructure; it clearly has to be about building a workforce who are skilled to face that challenge. The Turing scholarships speak to that need, but we also need an economy that has skills for everyone, if we want everyone to benefit from it. Government Front Benchers will know that the revival of apprenticeships since 2010 has been a life-changing opportunity for so many. During Colleges Week two weeks ago, I was fortunate, like many, to visit young people at Merton College who want to participate in IT apprenticeships. Measures to extend incentives for apprenticeships, and to stimulate the opportunities for small companies to play a huge part—particularly those in the small, high-tech entrepreneurial sector, such as those that I mentioned in Wimbledon—and to take more people on and provide them with a quality life experience will transform the opportunities for many.

However, there are a couple of elements that I hope Government Front Benchers will consider in this Budget. Everyone supports extending choice and opportunity for tertiary education. Despite what my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) said, I believe that student loans have facilitated a huge extension of the numbers of people going to university, but can it really be fair to charge an interest rate of
6.1%? It could become a disincentive, notwithstanding the fact that many loans are not paid back, and I urge the Minister to discuss with the Chancellor whether it can be justified. It would send a huge statement to young people going to university.

No one will quibble either with the Chancellor’s claim that everybody should pay the tax they owe, but HMRC’s application of IR35 rules is often retrospective, unresponsive and unfair. Under modern working arrangements, contractors are often working and employed for longer than they used to be. I understand the need for the rules, but there is an issue with the certainty and consistency of their application. I hope that Ministers and HMRC will reconsider whether it is fair.

As the Chancellor and others have acknowledged, risks lie ahead. The OBR’s growth forecast today is 1 percentage point lower than it was in 2015. There can be no other explanation than the uncertainty surrounding Brexit. If we had continued with the level of growth projected in 2015, not only could we have undertaken the largest fiscal loosening in a generation, providing vital investment for public services, but fiscal Phd could have met his fiscal objectives and balanced the books.

I urge the Minister to bear it in mind that no deal means no transition, uncertainty for British business and trade on worse terms. It is crucial, as the OBR has said, that we see no further disruption from Brexit and get a negotiated settlement that allows British business to prosper and the benefits of the Budget to come through for everyone.

3.30 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):

As a west midlands Member of Parliament for a constituency that has a long manufacturing tradition but is still heavily dependent on the success of our motor industry in general and Jaguar Land Rover in particular, I want to add to the thrust of the questions put by my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) and for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and ask about the impact of taxation in the environmental programme in our motor industry.

I agree with the Minister. Our motor industry is a world leader and internationally recognised. It is at the cutting edge of research and development on current models and leading the way in developing new generations of electric and autonomous vehicles. It employs more than 1 million people, either directly or in the supply chain and related industries, and its exports amount to 12% of our total goods exports.

Notwithstanding this contribution, our motor industry is facing problems that unfortunately were not tackled in the Budget. Investment has dropped by a third in the past year, while new car sales have dropped by 20%—a reduction driven by a catastrophic drop of 40% in sales of diesel cars. This has particularly affected Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands. Given this scenario, I would reasonably have expected a Chancellor of the Exchequer to consider measures to help an industry that is so important but in such a desperate situation.

Part of the problem is due to the chilling effect of Brexit, and I recognise that there is a limit to what the Chancellor can do about that, but the fact remains that consumer choice of new cars is heavily influenced by company car taxes and vehicle excise duty, and the current regime is both damaging to the industry and bad for the environment. The current messaging around diesel fails to recognise that new diesel engines have no more NOx emissions than petrol-driven cars and produce 20% less carbon dioxide. Perversely, the current move to petrol-driven cars is actually increasing carbon dioxide emissions.

This policy is being driven by our commitment to—I am sorry for the jargon—the new worldwide harmonised light vehicle test procedure. It is right that we have committed to this new testing procedure, which tries to demonstrate the real road experience of vehicle emissions, rather than just the laboratory testing, but it will have an unintended consequence, in that there will be an increase in the level of emissions demonstrated as a result of this taxation, and potentially millions of consumers will be driven into higher vehicle excise duty bands as a result. It will mean that the Government’s much-heralded cuts in income tax will be more than outweighed by their increase in vehicle excise duty.

The perverse outcome of the Government’s policy is, as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) pointed out in her question to the Prime Minister last week, that people are holding on to their current, more heavily polluting diesel cars, rather than buying cleaner, new models. The Government’s policy is damaging to our motor industry, to our environment and to the consumer, and the Government have missed this opportunity do something about it. I urge the Minister, who I think understands the issue, and is committed to keeping our motor industry in the forefront of international development, to impress on the Treasury that if we have a new Budget next year—and even if we do not—action must be taken urgently to remedy this situation and save our motor industry.

3.35 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con):

There is much to welcome in the Budget for my constituents, not least the raising of tax thresholds, the freezing of fuel duty, the business rates announcement, the freezing of beer duty, and other announcements, all of which are to be welcomed and will help my constituents.

I wish to sound a note of caution to Ministers—that we should use the words “the end of austerity” with care. I am afraid I do not agree that austerity has ended in the technical sense, because we have a debt of £1.8 trillion, and we have debt interest to pay of nearly £50 billion per year—and all that before the country takes one pace forward. To say that austerity is ending could be slightly misleading, suggesting that we can turn on the taps and spray money around to all the many good causes when, in effect, we cannot. I think we must accept, in all parts of the House, that the United Kingdom has spent more money than she can afford for many years, under all Governments, and it is time now to live within our means. That is the way any household proceeds—it lives within its means.

To do that, and to raise the money that we need, there is only one source of income that we can generate. Here in the House, we cannot generate income. As MPs, we only create the infrastructure for the income to be generated. Who generates income? It is business: men
and women, the entrepreneurs in all our constituencies. It is they who risk their home, their future, their livelihood, their children’s future, all to generate wealth and prosperity for this country, the taxes from which pay for all the public services into which everyone in this House, on whichever side we sit, wants to put more money. So to tax these business people heavily—to punish them—in an attempt to raise the money that we all need, will not succeed, and in the worst case we will end up in the position that the Leader of the Opposition exemplifies as his ideal—that of Venezuela. [H. MEMBERS: “Oh.”]

It is a fact! The Opposition groan, but that is what happens if you follow Marxism and punish the wealth creators—people leave the country. [Interrupt.] It is a fact.

We need to prioritise what money we have, and then decide how we spend it. Let us take overseas aid, for example—0.7% of GDP. Yes, we should help those who are not well-off around the world, but to have a target and to keep to it I think is wrong. We should give the developing world and those who need our help what we can afford to give them—just like any household budget. Then we would have more money for all the causes that we want to support. Charity starts at home.

In the short time that I have left, I shall touch on one or two items. I again advise Ministers that it is reform, reform, reform, not necessarily cash, that the NHS desperately needs. On the police, as I have said many times, there is no doubt that we want more officers on the beat. On welfare—[Interrupt.] I entirely back my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in his view on welfare. We need tax to be radically simplified; we need lower taxation. The corporation tax take has increased because the level has been lowered. That is a statistical fact.

On education, we do a lot of work with the f40 campaign group—all credit to them—and at a recent meeting we heard that there is a gap between education funding, which has risen in real terms, and what schools have to pay for teachers and pensions. That is where the gap is. I say to the Front Bench that more money is definitely needed for education, particularly in places such as South Dorset which have been at the bottom of the scale for far too long.

As a former soldier, I entirely concur with what an Opposition Member said about defence: £1 billion is welcome, but it is not enough. I accept that we spend the second largest amount on defence, but defence is an insurance policy we cannot afford to short-change.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The defence money is not new money; it comes from the money held at the Treasury for the Dreadnought programme. This fantasy new £1.8 billion is not new at all.

Richard Drax: I will leave the politics to the Scottish National party, but what I will say is that I agree that more money is needed for the defence of our country; there is no doubt about that. We need more sailors. We have two aircraft carriers, but can probably only afford to man one. Aircraft carriers need submarines underneath, aircraft on top, and ships beside; they are the biggest expense budget item we could possibly have. I ask the Treasury please not to forget our brave men and women of the armed services.

I have another minute—thanks very much to the SNP, and I am sorry that those on the Opposition Benches will regret it—so let me end on the topic of home affordability, as it is a key issue. We all talk about affordable homes, but they are not; 80% of market value is not affordable. I say to the Government that we must think about how we can provide homes that are truly affordable to those, particularly in my constituency, who simply cannot afford to buy them at current prices. Radical review of that is necessary, please.

3.41 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I agree with one point that the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) made: it is very welcome that we have had extra expenditure on our armed forces. Of course the Chancellor of the Exchequer made that announcement with pride, but he was in the Government who took the money away in the first instance and made things very difficult for our armed forces over the last eight years.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) rightly highlighted his school, and said it was a very good comprehensive school. My school was the first comprehensive school in this country. Like many schools, it has suffered from cuts over the past few years, and it will, I think, be upset that not much money has gone into education. Certainly the Barnett formula will not help schools in Wales.

This was a political Budget and its main target audience was the different factions of the Conservative party. The slogan—and it is a slogan—that austerity has ended is cruel in many ways, because that is not the reality. Why should we believe this Government? It was a Conservative Government who told us they would end the deficit by 2015, yet under the figures given by the Chancellor on Monday the deficit will still be there in 2023-24. They have missed their target by a little over nine years, and even then the figure will be 0.8%.

There was a missed opportunity on low carbon and climate change. A decade after we in the House of Commons introduced the Climate Change Act, which I was very pleased to vote for, the Government had an opportunity to move forward. They have invested in some low carbon measures through the growth strategies, and I welcome the nuclear sector deal, but one area where investment is greatly lacking is marine and tidal technology. The Government are missing a trick there, because many companies now want to invest in this country, and are doing so in research and development, but the money simply is not there for them to go from prototypes to actual commercial delivery. The Government need to look at that, because many of these companies are international and they will go elsewhere and manufacture the prototypes in other countries, and Britain will lose out.

I urge the Minister to put pressure on this issue. I have discussed it with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), and he does understand, but he needs to ring-fence a subsidy—and it is a subsidy—to help this new technology, as we did with wind. When Labour was in government the Conservatives criticised us for subsiding wind farms, yet they are now saying it is their flagship policy. That turnabout is most welcome, but we now need to concentrate on marine technology,
because we have the resource, the research and development and the skills, and we need to develop them moving forward.

Finally, I want to talk about the north Wales growth bid announcement. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), I cautiously welcome the £120 million for the 600,000-plus people of north Wales. It does not quite compare with the amount that appeared on the magic money tree for the Democratic Unionist party in Northern Ireland, which has half the population but got double the money. I wonder why that is, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, the money will be useful for the Welsh Government, for local government and for the business sector working with MPs to develop our economy, which has struggled over the past decade, and I very much welcome it.

Some of the bids involved include energy developments in north-west Wales, which is a good thing. We are building on the energy sector deals, which is good for the economy of north Wales, but we need to see the details. We need to see how much money is available now, so that the other areas of the Welsh Government can match-fund it to maximise the potential to make north Wales a centre of excellence in low carbon energy. That is something that I have campaigned for, alongside the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He was very good on this when he was in opposition.

We need to see more action from this Government, and I hope that the politics will be put to one side and that we will work together to develop low carbon energy so that we as a country can be a world leader. I hope that the region of north Wales can work with the regions of north-west England to develop and become more connected as a region of the United Kingdom, so that we as a country can be a world leader. I hope that the politics will be put to one side and I very much welcome it.

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3.46 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). I spoke to him in the Tea Room about fusion, and I think we both remain very excited about the potential of that project. I want to start by looking at unemployment. There was a time when the Library produced monthly assessments of constituencies, and my own constituency was invariably either at the top or near it in terms of best performance in dealing with employment. It should therefore come as no surprise that less than 1% of the economically engaged population in my constituency is unemployed at the moment. The number of young unemployed people—those under the age of 24—across the whole constituency amounts to 50. It is often argued that I know them all. I do not, but I wish I did.

Those figures illustrate an interesting point, which is that there is not a sufficient population within the constituency to fill the jobs necessary for growth and expanding businesses there. Two things need to happen in that regard. First, we need innovative solutions to the transport issue. I am pleased that the county council has helped to engineer smaller buses and lots of local buses, but I would like to see a little more help for this in next year’s spending review. Secondly, we need to make houses really affordable. A number of speakers have already mentioned the fact that houses are not genuinely affordable. There is one policy in the Budget that will help in this regard, and it is interesting that no one has mentioned it so far. It relates to the Chancellor’s attempt to use the discount on houses to keep them for local people. I fully support that policy, and I do so in my role as a Government champion for neighbourhood planning.

Kevin Hollinrake: Hear, hear!

John Howell: Thank you. The whole point is to ensure that this is done through the neighbourhood planning process. This will give people an enormous incentive to undertake a neighbourhood plan, because they know that it might give them the opportunity to say that the houses involved are genuinely to be allocated to local people.

Moving on, business rates reform will be a real help for businesses, and I do not know why the Opposition are downplaying it. In Henley—I think that the same is true in Thame—the problem is not so much about high rents, but business rates, and the local paper maintains an empty-shop watch to note any fluctuations. I sought some information before this debate, and the number of smaller properties in the Henley area that will benefit from this third reduction in business rates is something like 250,000—a phenomenal number.

I mentioned fusion in several interventions, and it is something that I have kept a close eye on not only because the JET Culham Centre for Fusion Energy is in my constituency, but because I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear fusion. I am therefore pleased that an additional £20 million will be spent on the fusion project, an element of which was recently opened by Prince William. As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, that is a useful sum of money because it is not the commercial project, which is being undertaken in France.

3.51 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). What has struck me about this Budget debate compared with others that I have taken part in is the number of Conservative MPs who have risen, yes, to welcome the Budget—of course they will do that—but also to point out that they need more resources in their constituencies, particularly for schools, but for other issues, too. Clearly, this desire for the end of austerity that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have recognised is not confined to Labour areas; it has spread across the country. The population is tired and exhausted by the lack or erosion of important public services, and I will concentrate on further education, skills and mental health provision for young people. The nation clearly wants change, but the measures that we have seen so far will do little, if anything, to address the issue adequately.

Colleges in all our constituencies are the real engines of social mobility. They are places where people can get a second chance and be supported. Some young people mature a little later than others, and a college is where they get their inspiration. They are where people who want to change focus in their lives can get support. We have known for years that college funding for full-time
16 and 17-year-olds is 20% lower than in schools, which just is not right. If we want, as was said earlier, to be a place of high skills and high wages—the brightest and the best in the world—we have to enable adult learners to participate and retrain when necessary. The number of adult learners now is about half what it was some 10 years ago, and concern is widespread among employers, the Russell Group of universities, Ofsted’s chief inspector and the FE Commissioner. Thank goodness for the talented, dedicated teachers who make up for the lack of resources in our colleges and support students every day.

We can achieve little as a country, however, if we do not address the urgent but silent crisis of young people’s mental health. Too many of our children are being failed. A young woman who had been cutting her arm came to my surgery. She showed me her scars. She had been to her GP and had been referred to child and adolescent mental health services, but she and her family were told that the situation was not serious enough to warrant her being seen by a specialist practitioner. That is a disgrace. How are we to build the strong, robust, vibrant, creative, intelligent, talented, resilient workforce this country needs if we cannot care for our young people who are experiencing such a crisis?

I recently read the minutes of my local mental health trust, because I wanted to find out what was happening: “The service has experienced an increase of 12% in referrals in the past six months and has struggled to meet demand.”

Yes, the service is struggling to meet demand. The minutes go on to say that the trust is considering ways to reduce referrals. My fear is that some of the additional investment, welcome though it is, will be used in A&E departments in crisis situations. The Government have reacted to strong campaigning from people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), but the money will not adequately address the need among young children for prevention, early intervention and upskilling the workforce. Those things need to happen if we are to build the workforce we need.

The greatest tragedy is that this is 100% preventable, and that is what the Government should be addressing, not throwing a little bit of money here and there to try to appease interest groups and strong campaigners—that will not do. We need to address the fundamental problems we are experiencing in our society, because the impact of the long period of austerity is now being felt by our children and by the most vulnerable people in our communities.

3.56 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome this Budget. It is the positive Budget our country needs as we look to the future after leaving the EU.

The Budget sends a positive message to hard-working people by raising the living wage, raising the tax threshold and putting extra money into universal credit. We are putting extra money into people’s pockets every month, which will be welcomed across the country.

It is also a positive Budget for business. The Federation of Small Businesses said, rightly, that it is the most pro-small business Budget for many years. There are many measures to help businesses across the country, particularly small businesses. The measures to help with business rates on the high street are welcome. The two main towns of my constituency, St Austell and Newquay, have real challenges in filling units to achieve a thriving high street, so the measures to reduce the business rates burden on those shops are hugely welcome and will go a long way to starting to address some of the challenges we face.

I thank the Chancellor for his decision to exempt public toilets from business rates, on which I have personally campaigned for six years. Back in 2012, I was the cabinet member on Cornwall Council with responsibility for public toilets, and I spent a year travelling Cornwall to visit far too many of them. Back then it struck me as ridiculous that we were charging business rates on public toilets; it was a real barrier to many small parish councils being able to keep those toilets open. It is very welcome that, after six years of pressing the issue, we have the right decision. This measure will go a long way to support tourism in Cornwall.

I also welcome the commitment in the Red Book to improve and increase the resilience of the railway line at Dawlish. I am sure many Members will remember the awful scenes in 2014 when the line on the south coast of Devon was washed away. We have done a lot of work, and the Government have already spent a lot of money to improve resilience, but we need to do a proper job. It is a welcome commitment in the Red Book that the Government will move forward with that next year.

We need now to press Network Rail to come up with a deliverable plan, and ensure that it gets properly funded and is delivered as soon as possible, because that railway link is vital to the Cornish economy. A lot of positive things are going on in Cornwall right now, but we need to make sure our transport connectivity is resilient and sustainable and continues to operate properly.

I wish to mention a couple of things that are happening in Cornwall, or potentially happening there, and that I hope the Government will continue to take note of. I have mentioned the opportunity of the spaceport in Cornwall in this Chamber today, but I want to really make the case, as it will be a huge boost to the Cornish economy. We welcome the measures the Government are taking to support the space industry. I believe Cornwall is very well positioned to play a major part in achieving the Government’s space ambitions. Our recently confirmed partnership between Spaceport Cornwall and Virgin Orbit puts us in a good place to deliver the horizontal capability we need to see developed.

Large deposits of lithium have also been discovered in Cornwall. With the growing demand for that metal for batteries, it is very much not only in Cornwall’s interest to revive our mining industry, but in the national interest to secure a domestic supply of this very important metal. I urge the Government to continue to support these emerging industries in Cornwall so that we can make sure that the potential is realised.

I want to finish by mentioning one thing I was disappointed about in the Budget: the increase in air passenger duty. At a time when we should be giving a clear message to the rest of the world that Britain is competitive on the global stage, raising APD is a disappointing step. I plead with the Treasury to hold APD and not increase it any more in the future to make sure that we are competitive and that Britain is very much able to operate on the world stage.
4.1 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): One of the most eye-catching and long overdue announcements on Monday was the £420 million to tackle potholes. Although I welcome that, the reason we have so many unfilled potholes around the country is the total lack of funding for local government. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) reminded us that his local authority has had a 64% cut in funding. The Tory leader of the Local Government Association has said that he expects local government cuts of 80%. That is nothing more and nothing less than the dismantling of the state.

I was elected in 1997 on a platform of “Education, education, education”, but now we have £420 million for potholes and £400 million for education. That is a slap in the face for hard-working teachers, who are stressed and overworked, and who are leaving the profession in their thousands. There is a dire need for further investment in education.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), opened this afternoon’s debate by talking about marine technology. I speak as a North Welsh MP who wishes to develop tidal power off the coast of north Wales, from Prestatyn all the way to Conwy, and I saw no encouragement—there was no funding—in this Budget for marine or tidal technology to help develop these new ideas. Wales and the UK have a chance to be world leaders in this technology, and there was nothing in the Budget.

I do not want to be seen as a curmudgeon. I do welcome the £2 billion for mental health. I ask whether it will be ring-fenced, because when extra money has been given in the past it has been spent on physical illness, and not on mental illness and human flourishing. As the Labour chair of the all-party group on mindfulness, I ask that a proportion of that funding be set aside to promote mindfulness in the NHS. It has been freely available since 2004 and the take-up has been minimal. I suggest that some of the £400 million the Government are going to raise from a digital tax—from Facebook and Google—should be ring-fenced for mental health. Facebook admitted in July that its product is having a detrimental impact on the mental health of children and young people all around the world, so this is a fair way of allocating that funding.

Several Members, especially on the Opposition Benches, have mentioned policing, because there is nothing for the police in the Budget. Since 2009, there has been a 90% increase in violent crime in north Wales, and 108 police officers have lost their jobs. Between 2017 and 2018 alone, there was a 28% increase in violent crime in north Wales. The police are trying hard. They have to deal with new issues, such as county lines. We have criminals from Liverpool and Manchester coming along the north Wales coast and into our market towns to sell their vile products and corrupt children and young people.

Many of my colleagues from north Wales have mentioned the north Wales growth fund. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, we were expecting £340 million but have been promised £120 million—far less than we expected. According to the Red Book, of that £120 million, the allocation for the next three years is respectively £5 million, £40 million and £40 million, not just for north Wales but for three other areas of the UK. Will the Minister say how much north Wales will actually get? I pursued the matter with staff in the Library, but even they are confused. I want some clarity on the funding for the north Wales growth fund. We want the specifics.

In conclusion, many Members present, especially on the Opposition Benches, have said that this is not the end of austerity. Let me misquote Churchill: now is not the end of austerity. It is not even the beginning of the end of austerity. But it is, perhaps, the beginning of the beginning of austerity. The only thing that will truly end these eight years of austerity is a Labour Government.

4.6 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am delighted to contribute to the debate and to add my voice of support to those who have already commended the Budget.

I applaud the measures brought forward by the Chancellor to support our high streets. As an MP who represents three towns—Long Eaton, Ilkeston and Sandiacre—and a few villages, all with their own independent shops, pub, cafes and restaurants, I know that the reduction in business rates from April next year and for the next two years will be a welcome boost to them all. With that measure, together with the £675 million set aside for the future high streets fund, the Chancellor recognises that we have reached a pivotal moment in our nation’s consumer history. He is quite right to recognise that we are no longer a nation of shopkeepers, but a nation of online shoppers.

As Ministers begin to establish the new high street taskforce, my plea is that they ensure that cities are not unfairly prioritised over towns. We need to make sure that towns are regenerated as much as city high streets. We also need to look forward and think about what else brings people to our historic market towns—the word is there: market—and support our street markets as well as high streets.

I welcome the plans to publish a refreshed midlands engine strategy next year. That will present us with a fantastic opportunity to cement the region as a hub of trade and commerce, as well as to capitalise on the benefits that High Speed 2 will bring to our region. I want to make sure that there is more emphasis on the east midlands, because I feel that, to date, a lot of the emphasis has been on the west midlands.

I have always been clear that once it is built, HS2 will undoubtedly unlock huge economic benefits for the east midlands in the form of new jobs, as well as providing much-needed capacity on an otherwise Victorian rail network. However, I am not afraid to be frank with Ministers: residents and businesses in my constituency must be compensated in full for the considerable disruption and displacement caused by the construction of the new line.

After my interventions, the Government have already made significant concessions on the extension of the compensation zones, and in some cases they have fast-tracked the process above and beyond what is required by law. We must go further still, and I will continue to make the case to Ministers and to HS2 Ltd for a bespoke compensation package for Long Eaton that takes into account the unique impact that the project will have on my town.
The £2 million of new seed capital to create a new development corporation, announced by the Chancellor in his conference speech at the beginning of October, is the first step to ensuring that we get the project right for local people. I look forward to playing an active role, along with Sir John Peace, chair of the midlands engine, who will lead this new corporation, so that, together, we can deliver a financial package to mitigate the impact on my constituents and develop the case for wider infrastructure investment from Government to support the Toton hub, such as a new motorway junction at 25A to relieve traffic trying to head to the M1 and to relieve congestion through Sandiacre and Long Eaton.

Given the action that my right hon. Friend has taken, I am convinced that he shares my ambition for our great nation. Under the careful stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and the Conservative Government, and after eight years of fixing the roof, what we see in this Budget is an optimism and a confidence for the future of our great nation.

It is a Budget that provides for lower taxes, higher wages, record employment, a growing economy and new investment in public services. That is what our party offers the British people, and that is what the Labour party would really put at risk.

I am proud to support this Budget on behalf of my constituents. I congratulate the Chancellor on the ambitious, yet pragmatic, approach that he has taken to our nation’s finances and I commend it to the House.

4.11 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) who spoke with great passion and knowledge about her constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you watch Match of the Day 2 on a Sunday night, but the presenter always ends by saying, “2 Bad, 2 Good”, and they choose two bad incidents from that week’s football games and two good. I thought that I would adopt the same approach on the Budget—[Interruption.] No, I want to be generous and have the two good things.

Let me start with the two bad things. The first disappointment in the Budget is the lack of mention of Yorkshire devolution. Eighteen out of 20 councils, including many of the leading Tory councils in Yorkshire, God’s own county, have come out in favour of a One Yorkshire devolution deal. We desperately need it, and an economic case for it has been made to Government. We do not want to balkanise the county into four sub-regions. A lot can be gained in terms of skills, inward investment and exports if we can get a Yorkshire deal.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury have traditionally favoured this plan more than the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, I would like to pass on my congratulations to the Minister for the northern powerhouse. He is on paternity leave and I understand that his second child was born in the last 24 hours. Hopefully, like many new fathers, he will come back a more mellow man and he will begin negotiations on One Yorkshire.

There is good news for Yorkshire today: Leeds has been chosen as the national base for Channel Four. All Yorkshire MPs will be rejoicing in that. It will be a great boost for the creative industry not just in Leeds, but throughout Yorkshire, and there will be celebrations throughout the county tonight.

One bad piece of news has been mentioned. No fewer than five Conservative MPs have asked for more money for their schools. I do not know what bright spark thought up the term “a little extra”, but they will go to their graves with that phrase. As we approach the Christmas season, it is like one of our loved ones giving us a pair of socks for Christmas. We look at them, and even though we would not say it, we think, “Is that all?” That is what many schools are thinking today. I advise Government Back Benchers that, if they are to rebel on anything, rebel on this, because it was the issue that got me a 249 majority at the last election and, unless the Government change their mind on this issue, it will be at the top of any leaflets that I put out if there is a snap election.

Let me turn quickly to two good items. It would be churlish of me, as deputy chair of the all-party group for pubs, not to welcome the freeze on beer duty, and not to welcome the rates measures, which will bring £120 million to pubs. I have an invite for you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and for any Members of the House. By fortuitous chance, we have a reception in dining room A, which I am hosting tonight, to celebrate Yorkshire beers, particularly Timothy Taylor’s beers in Keighley. All Members of the House are most welcome to join that celebration. Seven o’clock is well timed for the close of this debate.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made a scathing attack on the Government’s record on carbon capture and storage. In Yorkshire, as in Aberdeen, in 2015 we were looking forward to a substantial project when it was cut. There is good news, however, not in the Budget in particular, but announced just before it—the Government are again looking at carbon capture and storage, and at two clusters of it. The two obvious clusters would be the two areas that lost last time: Aberdeen and Yorkshire.

I want to give some support to the shadow Chancellor for his attitude to tax. We need to be pragmatic. Today, however, the one thing that I disagreed with in the excellent speech from our Front-Bench spokesperson was that the Government side had given up—they have not. They will have to be prised from power, and we have to be careful what we say. I look forward to similar pragmatism as we develop our policies on public ownership of water—we need to pay proper compensation and to have a proper regulator—and on employee ownership. I chaired an employee owned firm, and we need to do better as we develop our policy.

Finally, there could be a snap election. Our party will need a European policy if we defeat the deal that comes before the House. That policy should be to put back the Brexit date to allow the new Labour Government to negotiate a new deal aligning ourselves to the single market and the customs union, with a referendum to confirm that deal.
4.16 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I had been misled into thinking that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) would be next, but I am delighted to be called.

I welcome the Budget and in particular the fact that over 70,000 more people are in work in the north-east than when Labour left office—the equivalent of every man and woman in my constituency. This Budget ensures that there will be more.

The £14 million of direct investment in the South Tees Development Corporation brings the total pledged to the site over the last year to £137 million. Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen will now be able to deliver two major new metals projects, which will create 1,500 high-quality jobs. Despite the worst efforts of the Labour party, people recognise that something special is stirring in my region and that new hope is being kindled on the banks of the Tees.

There is social justice, too. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) mentioned mental health in her speech and I agree with her completely that it is a major crisis for many young people. I would add that £2 billion was committed to mental health in the Budget. That is an important investment, which it is important to note.

On universal credit, a fortnight ago, I visited my local jobcentre in Loftus. The team there were passionately committed to supporting people into work. The billions committed by the Chancellor means that Torsten Bell of the Resolution Foundation was able to state unequivocally that “the Government’s flagship welfare reform is now more generous than the benefit system that it is replacing.”

On Hallowe’en, let us put an end to the scaremongering that we keep hearing about that vital programme. As a nation, let us embrace the principle that everyone will now be better off in work than on welfare.

We also need to look to the future in other ways. Boldness and bravery must be our watchwords. On housing, the fundamental problem is Government-induced restriction on supply. Delivering demand-side policies without addressing the artificial constraints on the availability of land will serve only to increase taxes and inflate housing costs still further. Last month, in my paper for Freer, I called for us to lift the restrictions on development within half a mile of stations in the green belt.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Resolution Foundation. Does he also recognise that it identified that better-off households, the top 10%, will be £410 a year better off, whereas the equivalent of every man and woman in my constituency. This Budget ensures that there will be more.

Mr Clarke: I support tax cuts for hard-working people throughout our country. They had to put up with the highest burden of taxation in this country for generations. To go back to housing—I am conscious of time—the small release of land that I am proposing would create enough land supply for at least 1.5 million new homes, while leaving 98% of all existing green belt land entirely untouched. Indeed, the remaining area of the green belt would still be over 115% larger than it was in 1979.

There is growing cross-party consensus on this topic. I pay tribute to the campaigning work by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). We should also be looking at innovative proposals such as those from London YIMBY, which set out how we could empower individual streets to set their own design codes and build upwards rather than outwards.

We also need to look to Brexit. We must stop looking at our leaving a dysfunctional and anti-democratic EU as a problem to be mitigated, rather than as an opportunity to be seized. Trying to cling desperately to the skirts of the customs union is frankly unworthy of the world’s fifth-biggest economy. The announcement that there will be a special economic area in the Tees valley is genuinely welcome news. I hope that it will become the first free port in the UK after Brexit, and, indeed, the first of many. But if that free zone is to be a success, it will need meaningful powers. I refer Ministers to the speech I gave in Westminster Hall in the debate I secured with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). As we sit here today, we do not know the precise nature of our future trading relationship with Europe. I can say with confidence, however, that half measures and a lack of national self-belief must be rejected utterly as we forge our new path in the world.

4.20 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Eight years of punishing austerity have had a devastating effect on people across the country, and I see it in my constituency surgeries every week. I see it in the parents who tell me that they fear for the safety of their children because violent crime is rising. For them, austerity for policing has seen nearly £1 billion cut from the Metropolitan police, with neighbourhood police officers disappearing from their streets. I see it in the families who are crammed into overcrowded homes. For them, austerity has meant no new council homes. I see it in the nurses who tell me they once really loved and enjoyed their job but are now brought to despair by being overworked.

For them, austerity for the NHS has seen its slowest funding growth in its history. I see it in the disabled people who tell me that they have been driven to poverty and anguish, unable to afford basic necessities. For them, austerity for social security has seen support taken from them.

Those people are seeing some of the consequences of austerity. The Prime Minister promised that austerity was over, but this Budget breaks that promise—it is a broken promise Budget. The Government claim that this is an economy for everyone and that their cuts to social security are “fake news”. But is it fake news that almost 1 million disabled people will be worse off as a result of universal credit, according to the OBR; or that a single disabled person in work could be made £300 worse off a month; or that, despite the 12-month grace period, the minimum income floor will negatively affect some disabled people?

The Government claim that they are spending more than ever on disabled people, but we know that disability social security spending has shrunk by £5 billion over the past decade. The Chancellor has barely reversed the 80% cut to work allowances, and there has been nothing to mitigate the five-week wait facing disabled people claiming universal credit. His Budget does nothing to solve the burning injustices faced by so many disabled
people—and there are £7 billion-worth of cuts to social security still to come. The Budget does nothing for families who need social security to get by, with no change to the social security freeze or the two-child limit.

Austerity is not over for social security, and austerity is not over for policing. There is not an extra penny for normal, everyday regular policing. Austerity is not over for education. There is not an extra pound for the day-to-day costs of schooling. Austerity is not over for local government. There is nothing to close the nearly £8 billion funding gap that will exist by 2025. The money promised for the NHS is “simply not enough”, according to the Health Foundation. Austerity is not over.

According to the Chancellor, even the sticking plasters in the Budget are dependent on the Government’s Brexit shambles not causing a disastrous no deal. The grim truth of austerity is that it fails by not only the standards of social justice, but its own narrow standards. The Chancellor now claims that getting the deficit down by 2024 is some sort of achievement, hoping we forget that it was meant to be eradicated by 2015. Let us remember that this Government have missed every fiscal target they have set themselves, with the slowest post-crisis economic recovery on record. The UK is now the only major global economy in which investment is falling.

Low growth, low investment and low pay—that is the record of their austerity. What makes austerity all the more painful for so many of my constituents is that, while their public services and social security are cut, the super-rich and corporations have had a £110 billion handout in tax giveaways. It is austerity for the many and abundance for the few.

4.25 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in today’s debate and to welcome this Budget, which is a positive one for my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop.

It was not a major headline, but I was especially pleased that the Government committed in the Red Book to support communities to make the most of their local assets, including village halls and miners’ welfare facilities, and that the Treasury has listened to my representations on that subject. Only last week in Westminster Hall, I asked the Government to support miners’ welfare facilities and boost funding for their upkeep, particularly for sports facilities. During the debate I spoke of the importance of those facilities for coalfield communities, especially in terms of sports provision, as they exist in areas that generally top the statistics in terms of poor health and inactivity. Help to manage and improve those facilities, which were once the heart of coalfield communities, can bring them back to life and get more people engaged in sport and physical activity, which will save money for our local services and the NHS.

The future high streets fund is a great initiative. Mansfield town centre is a huge local priority of mine, with some brilliant local shops on the high street. I hope that the availability of this funding to support peoples’ and regenerative plans will add further pressure to my calls for Mansfield District Council to pull together a proper plan and vision to regenerate the town centre.

The Chancellor’s commitment to help small shops by cutting business rates by a third for small retailers is also great news for Mansfield. It will mean an annual saving of up to £8,000 for many local independent shops, pubs, restaurants and cafés and can help us to fill high street lettings, to give much needed breathing room to small businesses and to assist in bringing people back to the high street. In next year’s comprehensive spending review, I would like to see the Treasury go further and undertake a fundamental reform of business rates. It is a 20th-century tax in the 21st century, and we need to look at it more closely. Those two announcements for town centres are very welcome and will no doubt receive widespread support from my constituents.

The other key issue addressed in the Budget is the cost of living. Thanks to careful management of the economy, we were able to announce that the personal tax allowance threshold will be raised a year early, letting people keep more of the money they earn and helping with the cost of living. Combined with the rise in the national living wage, that means that full-time workers in my Mansfield constituency, where so many people have low incomes, will see over £600 a year more in their pockets. That is so important for normal people who are trying to get by and do right by their families, and I am pleased that this Government have put them at the heart of this Budget.

Nobody should pretend that anything is perfect, so there has to be something that I would have liked to see in the Budget. If I have one criticism of the Budget, it is that, while I have seen examples of where the additional one-off support of £400 million for schools can be utilised in a positive way in my constituency—I can think of several primary schools I have visited that will relish the prospect of kitting out their library properly or investing in new IT for students—we need to focus more on what should always be the No. 1 priority, which is educating our young people for the future. I hope that the comprehensive spending review in the new year will seek to address that. However, it is not always about splashing the cash. There are a number of ways in which we could help. I have put forward proposals for the Treasury on helping schools to reduce their building and maintenance costs, for example.

Plans for investing in our mental health services and social care are good news. I particularly welcome the announcement that the use of PFI for future projects such as hospitals and schools will be abolished. The Labour party agreed nearly 90% of all PFI contracts. King’s Mill Hospital, near my constituency, is one of the most expensive examples in the country, frittering away taxpayers’ money and ultimately making it harder for the NHS trust to manage its budget. It is great news that that will not be allowed to happen again. That is part of Labour’s legacy, along with high unemployment and trapping people on benefits, and this Government are working to address those issues.

Universal credit is a key component of that change. It was positive to hear about the transitional funding to support the migration process and that working people on low wages will get an additional boost through the new money announced by the Chancellor. I thank him for that, as it will be a particular help to people in my constituency.

When we came into government, the country was borrowing over £150 billion a year and unemployment had increased by nearly 500,000. Britain had suffered
the deepest recession since the war and we had the second biggest structural deficit of any advanced economy. Now, more people are in full-time work, unemployment is lower in every region of the UK, and wage growth is at its strongest for 10 years and is predicted to keep growing. As a party, we should be focused on cutting taxes, putting that money back in the pockets of hard-working people, and giving them the opportunity to succeed on the basis of their own talent and hard work.

As we leave the EU, we should grasp those opportunities, be proud of our businesses and industries, as the Secretary of State set out, and invest to secure our status as a world leader in so many areas. We must be able to export that leadership to the whole world to ensure the economic growth that Conservative Members know leads to jobs, wage growth and prosperity for the whole of the UK.

4.30 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Britain as a country is becoming more unequal and whole communities are being left behind. In the real lived economy as experienced by my constituents, there is a sense that things are getting harder, not better. Although we have heard all week from Ministers about the number of new jobs in the economy, if we listen to those in my community, they will tell us that work has become more insecure, more temporary and less well paid, with fewer rights and longer hours. For many people in Redcar and elsewhere, no matter how hard they work for how many hours and however many jobs they take on, work is not paying.

Eight years of austerity have ravaged communities such as mine. The Tories said that those with the broadest shoulders would bear the greatest burden of austerity. Well, that turned out to be a deceit, as it was communities such as Grangemouth, South Bank, Redcar and Eston that bore the brunt of the bedroom tax, the welfare cuts, fewer police keeping our streets safe, NHS walk-in centre closures, fewer buses and, ultimately, the closure of our steelworks. With universal credit coming to Redcar and Cleveland for full roll-out on 28 November, the five food banks that have been established in my constituency under this Tory Government are preparing themselves for a surge in demand for food parcels.

The dire warning from history is that if people feel their political and economic system has broken its obligations to them, they will turn to extreme alternatives. The global financial crash has heralded a rise in populism across the globe—in the USA, across Europe, and in Brazil this week. I would put UKIP and the hard-core Brexiteers in the same boat. I represent a constituency that voted for leave in the EU referendum in 2016, and my firm conviction is that the underlying causes of that snapshot of opinion two years ago were economic. Many people felt then, and feel now, that the economy is not working for them and their families. There is a strong sense that London and the south-east is sailing ahead, while towns in the north get left behind.

The old industrial jobs on Teesside are disappearing—no more the scores of thousands of jobs for young people leaving school at ICI, at Tees dock or in the steelworks that lined the river. Those jobs are gone and that security has gone, and what new jobs have replaced them are low paid and unstable. Of course, the final blow for us was the closure of the SSI—Sahaviriya Steel Industries—steelworks in Redcar in 2015, ending 175 years of steel making. It was not just the loss of over 3,000 skilled jobs; it was the loss of pride, dignity and hope, and the sense that the Government just did not care. No wonder my constituents shouted out in rage in the 2016 referendum.

What is the answer? One thing is for sure: it is not simple enough to be written on the side of a bus. The solution is certainly not a hard Tory Brexit. Crashing out of the EU with our trade deals in tatters would be a disaster for the remaining industries and the small businesses in Redcar, and I will oppose it. A slump leading to a recession leading to misery is not what people voted for, and I will not enable it.

Is a continuation of austerity the answer? No. Cuts to public services have slowed down our recovery. Austerity has ruined lives, and made our society more divided and our communities more brittle. We need to invest in public services and to borrow the money to do that. We need a massive injection of investment: more teachers, doctors, nurses, mental health specialists, police officers, firefighters and social care providers. Redcar and Cleveland Council needs the money it has been denied since 2010 to deliver the services people deserve. Taking £90 million away from local services has consequences for people’s lives.

This Budget did not deliver on anything that is needed on the scale required. The solution we need to bring our country back together is for the Government to invest in and prioritise communities that have been left behind and that roared in anger two years ago. Teesside has so much potential, and it is ready to be at the forefront of a new modern industrial renaissance. This is where we really needed support in the Budget, but £14 million does not come close to the £200 million needed to clean up the whole former SSI site. Civil servants were very quick to email straight after the Budget to say that this £14 million has not even been confirmed and is subject to making a business case to the Government.

I welcome the new powers, but the question is this: what exactly is a special economic area and how does it differ from the existing enterprise zones, of which there are already plenty in Teesside? If its only powers are to allow the development corporation to keep business rates, then that is nothing new, as councils will be able to do that from next year anyway. Does that mean that rates on the site will now go to the development corporation and not to Redcar and Cleveland Council? If so, local people are paying once again to fill the gap because the Government will not pay to clean up the mess they have left on the site. I have no doubt that the Government should pay—they closed the site, they rejected offers to keep it going and three months later they stepped in and took a stake in Port Talbot.

I am deeply worried by how little we saw in the Budget for Teesside. We have the potential on the site not just to turn things around for the people of Redcar and Teesside but to show the way on the sort of economy we could have in this country: a leading hub for green industries, creating jobs and helping us meet our climate change targets, carbon capture and storage, hydrogen economy, recycling and energy generation. We have a great future in Teesside—the brains, the hearts and the hands. We can make it happen.
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I have sat through the entire debate and thoroughly enjoyed it. There is only one other place where I would like to be today: joining the pupils of Logie Primary School on their beach clean. On Friday, I visited the pupils and staff there, and along with questions about how old I was and whether we could buy some more helicopters, I was asked whether I would join them on that school visit. I had to say that unfortunately I could not, as I was speaking in the Budget debate, but that the least I could do was mention them and their school, which just yesterday received such a glowing Education Scotland report, in today’s Budget debate. I have now done that.

I want to raise a few issues, but before that I would like to mention some of the contributions from Scottish National Members since Monday. It all started with the boorish behaviour of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford)—we had to endure his 30 minutes. I thought that was bad enough until I listened to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). The hon. Gentleman was not only boorish, but inaccurate: he said that Scotland’s block grant had been cut as a result of this Budget. Yet as I said in my intervention, between this year and next, the Scottish Government block grant will go up in both real and cash terms. That is what is happening to the Scottish Government block grant as a result of this Conservative Government—up £866 million in cash terms and up £381 million in real terms: that is this Westminster Government delivering for Scotland.

I want to focus on a couple of issues in the short time I have. The first for me, as the Member of Parliament for Moray, representing 40% of all Scotch whisky distilleries, is, of course, the freeze in spirits duty. I am delighted to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury on the Front Bench. He gave me an extremely positive response during Scottish questions on how important it would be for the Government to deliver a positive Budget for Scotch whisky, and the Government have done that. Earlier, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury was on the Front Bench; I was delighted to host him in Moray—we went to visit a distillery. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury came to Moray and we visited another distillery. I have also raised the matter personally with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The only one in the Treasury I did not raise it with was Gladstone the cat—everyone else has heard from me and my Scottish Conservative colleagues about how important freezing spirits duty is for the Scotch whisky industry. That industry has repaid our trust: in the past five years, there has been £500 million of capital investment in Scotch whisky distilleries—that is how the industry has reacted to positive announcements in this Budget and the freeze last year as well.

I also want to thank the Chancellor for the mention of the Moray growth deal in his Budget statement. I have campaigned for that since my election as Member of Parliament. Following the announcement on Monday, I was delighted to see apprentices from Moray unveil a plaque in Cooper park, made from materials from their various trades, saying “MGD”—Moray growth deal—“under construction”. The green light from the Chancellor at the Dispatch Box during his Budget statement has been really well received in my local area. I look forward to working with the Moray growth deal business assembly chair, Michael Urquhart, and all the people, across parties, involved in securing that deal. I have spoken to Treasury Ministers and others about it, and I am excited about the future.

I could talk about many other positive things in the Budget, particularly the increased investment in defence, given that my constituency is home to RAF Lossiemouth and 39 Engineer Regiment at Kinloss. That is extremely important for us in Moray.

I commend the Budget, because it delivers for Moray and it delivers for Scotland. I can only hope that the Scottish National party, when it comes to the Scottish Government’s budget later this year, can deliver in the same way. Sadly, previous experience does not bode well. They have made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom. With almost £1 billion extra in this Budget going from Westminster to Holyrood, I hope they will deliver for their areas as this Government have delivered. Sadly, in the past they have decided to cut the amount of money going to Moray Council, and cut the amount of money going to health boards in the north of Scotland. That does not bode well. The ball is in their court to use the extra resources from the Westminster Government.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I want to take this opportunity to raise three issues that are of particular importance to my constituents. First, however, we have a Budget that still predicts lower economic growth over the coming years and puts us near or at the bottom of the international growth leagues—and that is without the impact of Brexit. From a hard Brexit to a soft Brexit the economy will be hit, impacting on the UK’s ability to grow its economy. Even the Government’s own impact assessments show that under whatever deal the Prime Minister negotiates we will be worse off, especially in the north-east of England where almost two thirds of our trade is with the EU. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, business investment is down since the referendum.

The Brexiteers’ chief economist, Sir Patrick Minford, has said that the car industry will need to be run down, impacting on the thousands of jobs in the north-east and around the country that are reliant on that industry, because, in his words, “these things happen”. In my view, the loss of thousands of jobs is not a price worth paying for Brexit. That is why, when we find out what the final deal is, it should be put to the people in a people’s vote, so they have the final say on this once-in-a-lifetime decision.

One local issue pertinent to my constituents and the Budget is the provision of GP services. The lack of GPs is a national concern that is now impacting on our local communities. Skerne Medical Group, which is currently consulting on the future of its provision in Sedgefield, Fishburn and Trimdon, is at the forefront of the crisis. It is putting in place a four-year review of its future services. Skerne Medical Group’s surgeries in Sedgefield, Fishburn, and Trimdon Colliery are part of that review. The Trimdon Village surgery is not and faces closure. I believe that it should be a part of the review, but I understand the challenges faced by the Skerne Medical Group. For all the increases in the NHS budget, we found out today that public health services and the education and training of nurses and doctors will be cut by £1 billion next year.
Professor Anita Charlesworth, director of economics and research at the Health Foundation, has said that although more money has been made available for the NHS “there is a big risk that it won’t feel like that in hospitals and GP surgeries over the coming years”. In 2015, the Government promised to recruit 5,000 additional GPs over five years up to 2020. Now that deadline has been changed to “as soon as possible”. In fact, it is worse than that. In 2015, there were 34,500 GPs, but the latest figures for June 2018 show that there are now 33,163—more than 1,400 fewer GPs than when the target was set. A medical school has been opened at Sunderland University. It is envisaged that 50 students will enrol next year, with an increase to 100 by 2020. That is good news, but how many will stay in the region once they have been trained? The crisis in GP provision in my constituency and elsewhere is now, and the Government need to address the problem now.

Universal credit continues to be a problem. The Children’s Society indicates that even after the additional funding announced in the Budget, the reduction in work allowances under universal credit, introduced in April 2016, will cost families about £2,460 a year. I am still concerned about the design of universal credit. It is causing many practical and frustrating problems for many of my constituents. For example, one constituent, a woman working 25 hours per week as a cleaner, is a single parent to a young child in primary school, so she needs to be around for childcare. She had a change in circumstances, so was moved on to universal credit. There was a delay in her first payment as her claim was not processed correctly, so she had to resort to visiting a food bank. She received an advance payment, but now her claim settlement leaves her with too little to live on after paying her rent. She is much worse off after moving from tax credits to universal credit. People will say that austerity has come to an end, but the examples of GP surgeries and what we face with Brexit and universal credit proves that it has not.

Finally, on town centres, Newton Aycliffe in my constituency is home to a small shopping centre. The owners have spent several million pounds on improving the environment and have won awards in doing so, but there are still empty shops, like in a lot of town centres around the country. A £675 million future high streets fund therefore seems like a good idea, but we need details of how that money will be spent. Are hard-pressed local councils expected to pick up the tab? If so, renewing our town centres will end up only competing with the private sector. The Government need to address the problem now.

In 2015, the local partnership between public and private sectors has moved the city forward since the Conservatives took control of the local council, jointly with independents, in 2015. I was therefore pleased to see on page 66 of the Red Book an explicit reference to Stoke-on-Trent as a shortlisted city for the transforming cities fund, because fully realising the city’s ambition requires us to improve our transport infrastructure. This is a fundamental requirement for improving labour mobility in the city, increasing productivity and decreasing the time lost to and the misery of daily congestion. This funding will help to ensure that we are better connected as a city, making better use of our rail network and ensuring that our bus network improves significantly to connect all our communities. This comes alongside the £420 million pothole fund, which will build on the significant work the local council has already done.

On high streets, Stoke-on-Trent is unique in comprising six market towns and has a significant number of Victorian and Edwardian properties that are structurally sound but none the less in quite a poor state. Far too many are not suited to meet the demands of modern retail and the challenges of online and out-of-town shopping, so
I have been pushing Ministers for a dedicated fund for regeneration, restoration and conversion, and I am delighted it has come about. As I have argued, measures to increase footfall in town centres such as Longton and Fenton in my constituency, including increasing the number of residents and new businesses, are critical. Some 25% of employment in Stoke-on-Trent South is in wholesale and retail, so the relief on business rates for small retailers and the fund for high streets will be especially welcome in Stoke-on-Trent.

4.50 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Chancellor tried hard, but I have a feeling we will all be back here in the spring and that Monday’s event will look largely irrelevant. The mantra now is that the pain and suffering has been worth it, but according to a recent study, only 8% of my Selly Oak constituents share the Chancellor’s view that the years of austerity have been worth it, particularly when they reflect on the damage to infrastructure and public services. Eight years of austerity have not cleared the deficit and the Tories no longer promise a budget surplus. In fact, it seems the new Tory norm is to settle for a deficit of around £20 billion a year.

I welcome the review of the worldwide light vehicle test, but a bigger man might have acknowledged that it was his premature decision on vehicle excise duty that sent entirely the wrong signal about clean diesel engines and threatened the job prospects of thousands of Jaguar Land Rover workers in Birmingham and the west midlands. He might also have recognised the £110 million loss of Land Rover workers in Birmingham and the west midlands.

I do not think that the Chancellor really wanted to deliver this Budget; he just got boxed in, just as he is boxed in when it comes to making the real decisions that would benefit the economy; but the ideologues do not care, and that is why we are ignoring our schools, dismissing crime, forgetting our children’s services and ignoring the WASPI women and everything that would make a difference to this economy.

4.55 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I rise to speak in this Budget debate, concerned about the unfairness that this Budget has created in this country—concerned that for one part of the country, there remains no tax cut for hard-working people; concerned that in one part of the country, the measures unveiled to support our high streets and SMEs are not being replicated, extra measures to help young people on to the housing ladder will not apply and the potholes will remain unfilled. I speak, of course, of the north-east of Scotland, which suffers under a central-belt-biased, economically illiterate, ideologically dogmatic, anti-aspirational, anti-wealth-creation, anti-business, distracted Administration, who punish the strivers and the grafters while we in the Conservative party reward them. Nurses, doctors, teachers, policemen, entrepreneurs, small business owners, the people that get up at the crack of dawn to open the shops in rural Deeside or Donside and the guys and girls who take off from Aberdeen airport to spend two weeks offshore doing hard, sometimes backbreaking work to maintain our energy supply are punished and taxed more, simply by virtue of living in Scotland. They are the people who this Government—this Conservative party—are committed to supporting.

The SNP’s decision not to match our plans to raise the threshold for the higher rate of income tax means that hard-working people in Scotland will be £1,000 worse off than their counterparts south of the border—£1,000 worse off for doing exactly the same job in the same country. Well, the Scottish Conservatives say, “Enough!” Today, we call on the SNP Administration to match this Government’s commitment to those who deserve a break and pass on this tax cut to the Scottish people.
It is safe to say that, in terms of totemic industries in Scotland, fishing and whisky are probably up there. Add to that brewing, and it makes for quite a good Friday night. All the above are reaping the benefits of decisions made by this Government and in this Budget: beer duty frozen, spirits duty frozen, and for the fishing industry, as we look towards that sea of opportunity that leaving the EU will bring—remembering, of course, that the SNP would have us back in the common fisheries policy—we welcome the £10 million of investment from UK Research and Innovation.

Of course, by far the biggest industry for the north-east of Scotland is the oil and gas industry, and far from the doom and gloom espoused by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), the sector has made it clear to us that the UK Government’s support over the past four to five years has been crucial to ensuring its survival, as it was buffeted by the winds of dramatically fluctuating oil prices and the longest sustained downturn in the sector’s history. The £2.3 billion of support from this UK Government since 2014 has been welcomed—"Interrogation." I would love to hear it welcomed by the hon. Gentleman: perhaps that is what he is trying to say from a sedentary position. I am not sure. That support has been welcomed by an industry that has contributed over £330 billion to the British economy, that supports over 330,000 jobs across the United Kingdom and that has a supply chain worth nearly £30 billion, stretching into every nation and region across our islands—servicing domestic activities and exporting almost £12 billion of goods and services to other basins around the world. It is a shame that the Scottish National party does not support it as the Scottish Conservatives do. That is why I and the wider oil and gas industry and the subsidiary industry that I represent have welcomed this Government’s decision not to increase tax and welcomed its commitment to maintaining fiscal stability.

Drew Hendry: You have done nothing.

Andrew Bowie: Exactly; we have done nothing. That was what the oil and gas industry was asking us to do. They want stability. Indeed, Oil and Gas UK has stated that the fiscally stable regime implemented and overseen by this Government, combined with our support for the sector and the industry’s own huge strides forward in cost cutting, slashing waste and pooling resources, has made the UK continental shelf one of the most attractive basins in the world in which to do business—something that we would not know from listening to the hon. Gentleman earlier on.

This was a great Budget for the people and businesses of the north-east of Scotland. Oil and gas, spirits producers, brewers and the fishing industry have all benefited from this Government’s decisions.

In Scotland, we have two Governments, sadly, and the contrast could not be starker. "Interrogation." Well, it is sad in terms of who is in government in Edinburgh. One is a nationalist Government, governing for their own base, focused on the central belt, focused on raising taxes, punishing aspiration, creation division and fostering grievance. The other is a Unionist Government, governing for the whole United Kingdom, backing business, rewarding hard work and supporting growth and aspiration. One is focused on ripping up our country, the other on growing it and helping our people grow with it. That is what this Government do, and that is what this Budget does, and that is why I am pleased to back it today.

5 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on behalf of my constituents, and I am going to draw on some of the words of one of my greatest constituents, Robert Noonan, better known as Robert Tressell, buried in a pauper’s grave in Rice Lane City Farm in my constituency of Liverpool, Walton. He is the author of that great socialist manuscript “The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists”, which tells the story of a group of painters and decorators—as he was himself—struggling to make ends meet in a rigid system. His work has been credited with helping the Labour party win the 1945 post-war election.

This Budget is full of modern-day money tricks, which I will come on to, but the great money trick in “The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists” starts with the characters, painters and decorators working at the turn of the last century discussing the causes of poverty. The painter Frank Owen intervenes. “Money”, he says, “is the cause of poverty”, and what follows is a demonstration of “the money trick”, one of the finest passages of comic political prose in English literature.

Owen takes his slices of bread from his lunch basket and asks all the men for their bread, which he places in a heap, saying “These…represent the raw materials which exist naturally”.

He pulls out some pocket-knives, and says that they are the means of production. Owen says:

“I represent the landlord and capitalist class. That is to say, all these raw materials belong to me… Now you”—maybe the Members opposite—“represent the working class: you have nothing.”

But, he goes on, in order to turn his raw materials into something of use, we need work:

“I have invented the Money Trick to make you work for me.”

Owen hands the bread and knives to the men. They cut the bread into blocks, and return them to Owen. The workers receive their wages—of £1. The money they earn is their own, to do with as they like, and the things they produce are now the property of the capitalist class. Owen says of his blocks of bread:

“These blocks represent the necessaries of life. You can’t live without some of these things, but as they belong to me, you will have to buy them from me: my price for these blocks is—one pound each.”

The cycle continues: Owen’s blocks of bread—his profits—pile up, the rich getting richer, while the poor exchange their wages for the necessities of life, all the time staying poor. In Tressell’s masterpiece, the workers are the “philanthropists”, giving the value of their work to the rich who benefit from a rigged system.

Since those words were first written more than 100 years ago, there have been huge steps forward for working-class people and their rights, hard-won by the struggle of trade unions and the Labour movement. But the truth is the aspiration day as it was then, because working people are not responsible for poverty. This is a broken system, that inflicts poverty, inequality and human misery, and it needs reform. We have had the longest squeeze on
wages since the Napoleonic wars. Today’s young people are set to be poorer than their parents for the first time in modern history.

This week, we heard the Chancellor come up with some of his own money tricks to mask this Government’s economic failure. He suggested that Labour had caused the global financial crisis. There have always been deficits and borrowing: the Tories ran them for 18 years when they were in government. The 2008 global financial crisis caused a global recession. It was not investment in schools and hospitals that crashed the economy; it was the greed and recklessness of a deregulated financial sector. Let us take another example: the so-called jobs miracle. This involved boasting of record levels of employment while saying nothing about the phenomenon of insecure, low-paid and bogus self-employment. Wages are lower today than they were 10 years ago, and some of my constituents are doing three, four or five of those jobs to make ends meet. Today, the majority of people in poverty in this country are also in work. What an absolute disgrace!

This Government cannot trick their way out of this crisis. Poverty and deprivation can be seen on the streets of Liverpool every single day. Robert Tressell’s novel is full of tragedy and despair, but it also offers a glimmer of hope. In a chapter entitled “The Great Oration”, Tressell describes the creation of a new kind of society: the co-operative commonwealth, based on shared ownership and worker self-management. I think that the shadow Chancellor has read it. That is called socialism, and it is about time we redoubled our efforts to attain it.

5.5 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). I look at self-management slightly differently, in that I have been in business for most of my life. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I rise to commend many of the policies in the Budget, and particularly its support for small and medium-sized enterprises. For many years, I also played rugby union for the York Railway Institute, and I look back fondly on those times. However, there were one or two clubs at which I did not enjoy playing quite so much. One in particular was Halifax Vandal, where the ground sloped at what seemed like 45° from one set of posts to the other. Trying to get out of the low-end 22 seemed virtually impossible, particularly with the additional challenge of a head wind and ankle-deep mud. At least it was the same for both sides, but for many SMEs, there is no half-time turnaround. They seem to face a consistent uphill battle with head winds that many big businesses do not have to cope with.

An example of this involves some of the digital businesses, which spend an average of 0.6% of their turnover on business rates, compared with high street retailers that spend around 2.3%, according to the Centre for Retail Research. SMEs also compete with retailers that spend around 2.3%, according to the Centre for Retail Research. SMEs also compete with the likes of Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook, which are able to shift either sales or profits to the lowest corporation tax jurisdiction to avoid paying their fair share of tax while still revealing in their claims to do no evil and in their corporate social responsibility credentials. I therefore welcome the Chancellor’s commitment to business rate reductions for smaller businesses and the introduction of a digital services tax. Our job here is to level the playing field—not to pick winners—and his actions are doing exactly that.

The other area in which SMEs are at a critical disadvantage is when they are in dispute with their bank. It is now abundantly evident—particularly since the Treasury Committee released the full report on the RBS global restructuring group scandal in February 2018—that banks took businesses apart and stripped them of their assets to replenish their own balance sheets. Thousands of viable, significant and substantial businesses were involved. There were similar occurrences at Lloyds and others, yet incredibly, we leave the victims at the mercy of these very banks when they claim for compensation and consequential loss.

The Financial Ombudsman Service has very limited jurisdiction, with a maximum compensation level of £150,000 and limited competence to adjudicate such claims, and the courts are simply out of reach. Lloyds bank, for example, has a £1 billion per annum budget for legal fees. It is impossible to get justice in court against a high street bank. The proposed extension of the Financial Ombudsman Service is to be welcomed, given the vital improvements to its level of competence, but all four of the major reviews of bank dispute resolution over the past year—from our all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, the Treasury Committee, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Walker review—have concluded that there will still be a gap in the access to justice. Around 86% of businesses will not have access to justice, even with the Financial Ombudsman Service’s extended jurisdiction, and the lack of confidence between banks and businesses will mean lost start-up and scale operations, which will damage our economic prospects.

Three of the four reviews support the establishment of a financial services tribunal that would work in a similar way to an employment tribunal in that the claimant would not suffer the costs of the defendant—the bank—should they lose. That simple but effective measure is supported by the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, the Treasury Committee, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Walker review—have concluded that there will still be a gap in the access to justice. Around 86% of businesses will not have access to justice, even with the Financial Ombudsman Service’s extended jurisdiction, and the lack of confidence between banks and businesses will mean lost start-up and scale operations, which will damage our economic prospects.

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Three of the four reviews support the establishment of a financial services tribunal that would work in a similar way to an employment tribunal in that the claimant would not suffer the costs of the defendant—the bank—should they lose. That simple but effective measure is supported by the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, the Treasury Committee, the Financial Conduct Authority, the FSB, the Small Business Commissioner, several banks and just about every parliamentarian. We cannot have businesses playing uphill and downwind against a much stronger opponent, and it is our duty as legislators to level this most important of playing fields.

5.10 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). We are discussing the economy, growth and productivity. I have been saying for some time that growth cannot just mean “more”; it has to mean “better”—a point echoed in Dame Kate Barker’s excellent recent independent report on the Cambridgeshire economy, which was launched by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy a few weeks ago. That means upskilling, reskilling and, most importantly, giving young people the best start in life, equipping them with the skills and tools that they need for the future. That is how we create not only a productive workforce, but happy, sustainable, resilient communities. Unfortunately, however, this Budget fails to achieve that. While the skilled workforce in Cambridge has
been the driving force behind our economic success, uncertainty around our future relationship with the EU, coupled with the Government’s regressive immigration policies and a failure to make the right investment in skills and infrastructure, risks internationally focused businesses looking elsewhere—a point also echoed in Kate Barker’s report. We must do better.

This Budget failed on substance, but there was also the matter of its tone, as other hon. Members have pointed out. Promising a paltry £400 million for schools to “buy the little extras they need”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 658.]
is an affront—a shameless insult. The Chancellor may say that school funding will be considered in the spending review, but teachers and parents in my constituency have a clear message for this Government: schools are stretched to breaking point. That line from the Chancellor, reminiscent of a 1950s patriarch to a subjugated wife—“Get yourself some little extras. Don’t step out of line. How dare you ask for more?”—shows this Government’s disrespect for not only our hard-working teachers and schools, but future generations, too.

Like many colleagues, I regularly visit schools and colleges. In recent weeks, I have been in nurseries, primaries, secondaries and colleges, and I have been told by two separate headteachers that if funding does not improve, their school will be making redundancies, despite staff already being overstretched. Staff are going off sick due to stress. Some staff recruited internationally have trouble getting visas. The number of children with complex and special educational needs has increased, but schools do not have the resources to provide the support that those children need.

I agree with Kevin Courtney, the joint general secretary of the National Education Union, when he says: ‘The Chancellor has shown in this budget the depth of his ignorance on school funding. Schools have a £2 billion shortfall in funding a year—which is set to get worse. Capital funding has been cut by a third. A £400 million one off payment for ‘little extras’ will do nothing to address this. The Government has promised more money for potholes than schools’.

Let me briefly divert into those potholes, because £400 million may sound like a lot, but I hope that Members are aware that the backlog repair bill is £12 billion, meaning that just one in every 30 will be filled. That is a promise for our roads, and I doubt that even one school in 29 will find the “little extras” adequate. A little bit will help, but do not forget the Education Policy Institute’s recent report, which showed that just 60% of teachers continue to teach in state schools five years after qualifying and that applications for teacher training are falling. Despite pupil figures rising by 10% since 2010, teacher numbers have remained static, meaning pupil-to-teacher ratios have risen. Class sizes are bigger, and teachers are working harder and longer hours.

This is not just about schools. Nurseries will struggle to stay in business, according to the Department for Education’s own figures. When I visited a local maintained nursery recently, I was told that, without extra help, it will hit the buffers next April.

At the other end of the age range, sixth-form colleges, too, have been treated with disdain by the Chancellor and his team. Despite the call from the Sixth Form Colleges Association to increase the base rate for all 16 to 18-year-olds, it is currently frozen at £4,000 per student and £3,000 for 18-year-olds—it has been cut twice since 2010.

There is no mention of further education. The further education commissioner told the Select Committee on Education earlier this year that further education funding is “unfair” and “sparse.” I have seen that at first hand at Cambridge Regional College, which I visit regularly.

The staff do excellent work with students and apprentices from across the east of England, but the college remains under-resourced and overstretched.

For a Government who claim to care about skills, this is a disgrace. They are failing to provide young people with the education they need to succeed by crippling education budgets. Time is spent on scoping and organising substitute teachers to plug the gaps, rather than on educating future generations. I was a chair of school governors in the mid-1990s, and it felt just the same under a Tory Government then—what a change a Labour Government made. The current mean spending regime is not the way to create a workforce of creative, empowered and optimistic young people; it just tells them that the Government do not care.

5.15 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I commend this Budget, which stimulates business and puts money back in the pockets of hard-working families. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am also a businessman.

I am known for my brevity—just ask my wife—and I do not intend to disappoint. I want to be a ray of sunshine by focusing on the annual investment allowance, which is moving from £200,000 to £1 million on 1 January 2019. This is transformative for the grantees, for the white van man and for SMEs the length and breadth of this country. This is not a fat-cat tax bonus; it will potentially unlock hundreds of millions of pounds.

There is pent-up investment in my constituency. Farmers want to buy combines and tractors, and food manufacturers want to buy labour-saving equipment—companies such as Dean’s shortbread in Huntly and Mackie’s ice cream in Inverurie. And, of course, there is the oil and gas sector. There are 233 service companies in my Gordon constituency, let alone in the neighbouring constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has now gone, and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson).

The oil and gas sector is the engine room of the Scottish economy, and I would be happy to show the Business Minister or any other Minister around next time they visit. The supply chain is worth a staggering £30 billion, and it supports the majority of the 300,000 oil and gas-related jobs.

Some 233 companies in Gordon will see a fivefold increase in annual investment allowance. If every one of them takes it up, it could release as much as £200 million of investment just in one part of Scotland: high-tech, serious investments by companies such as Hoover Ferguson of Kinthore; STATS, the pipeline intervention company, also of Kinthore; Hydro Group of Bridge of Don, which makes umbilicals for the oil and gas industry; Sparrows of Bridge of Don, which makes offshore cranes; Flowline of Oldmeldrum, a growing exporting business; and Aker Solutions, a Scandinavian company that has invested
tens of millions of pounds in Aberdeen, confident in the future of the Scottish economy. I have visited each and every one of them. Ambitious, confident and positive—that is not just me; it is the companies.

The oil and gas industry is estimated to generate £920 billion over the next 30 to 40 years. If each and every one of those companies invests in the future of oil and gas, we could see that £920 billion flow into this economy. That is a positive message for business. This is a tangible investment in business to boost the UK and Scottish economy and a demonstration of Her Majesty’s Government’s support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

The north-east of Scotland had a deep turndown, even though unemployment in the area is only 1.2%—they are a hard-working crowd. The Chancellor has announced continued fiscal stability for the oil and gas industry. He has listened to his Scottish Conservative colleagues. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury for filling the oil and gas industry with confidence. Last year’s transferable tax history incentive has been delivered by Her Majesty’s Government. Fiscal stability for oil and gas has been delivered by Her Majesty’s Government. Low corporation tax has been delivered by Her Majesty’s Government. And a fivefold increase in the annual investment allowance has been delivered by Her Majesty’s Government. Meanwhile, we have had punitive business rates from the SNP Government; the highest personal income tax in the country delivered by the SNP; and empty commercial properties being knocked down in the north-east of Scotland because of SNP policies. Her Majesty’s Government are delivering for business, growing the economy and stimulating jobs. This is a Budget for business.

5.20 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): We are here to debate not just the minutiae of the Chancellor’s figures, but the consequences that will flow from it. I want to draw the House’s attention to the fact that, although the Chancellor feels able to allow another £15 billion into the economy, with an £11 billion increase in spending and a £4 billion cut in the tax take, that represents just 1.8% of the £842 billion total managed expenditure estimate for next year, a smaller percentage than the rate of inflation. This is not a game-changing sum and it is easy to be bamboozled by all the mentions of “billions” in the discourse into thinking otherwise. The majority of my constituents will not notice any significant difference in their taxes from this Budget.

Like Robin Hood in reverse, the Chancellor is rewarding the wealthiest with the bulk of the £4 billion tax cuts, while reducing the amount available via universal credit for the worst-off. It is shameful that we will not be able to vote against the raising of the higher rate threshold on tax without also voting against the lower rate threshold. It is unjust and misleading to put us in that position of having to do both at the same time.

What my constituents will notice is the effect of all the things the Chancellor is not doing. Significantly, he is not deploying the significant capital investment in our economic capabilities that Labour promised in our 2017 manifesto and that we have reiterated at every opportunity since then. Conservative Members consider themselves to be the party of business and constantly call for tax cuts rather than spending increases. But in an economy that suffers from low productivity and a lack of demand, the sensible approach is to massively increase the Government’s capital expenditure. Where is the national transformation fund that Labour promised? Instead, we get a pathetic additional £200 million for the British Business Bank—that is about £2.50 per person. Where is the green investment bank? Where is the financial support for greening the economy through investment in renewable electricity generation, through zero emissions vehicles and through insulation grants?

This is what my constituents in Ipswich will notice. They will notice that, while we are getting new trains, we are not getting all the rail infrastructure investment that would make those trains run faster, run more reliably, or, judging by my experiences on Monday, run at all. They will notice that there was no additional funding to provide the north Ipswich bypass or to improve the junctions on the A14—that is vital not only for the economy of Ipswich, but for the smooth transport of goods to the UK’s premier port at Felixstowe. They will notice that the Crown post office has been franchised out, and that the number of post offices, their convenience and location, and the range of services they are able to deliver continues to deteriorate. They will also notice that, although Suffolk is lucky enough to have won first prize in the local full fibre networks challenge fund contest—about £9 per Suffolk person—that will provide full fibre connections only to key public buildings and comes nowhere near creating ultra-fast coverage for all.

My constituents will notice that, because Amazon and other online shopping giants continue to be able to get away with paying almost no tax, the shops they trust and rely on in what used to be called our “Golden mile” in Ipswich continue to close. They will notice that councils are not being enabled to support the bus services that people need to get to work. They will notice an almost total lack of council discretionary spend, leaving projects such as Ipswich’s creative computing club, which teaches coding to disaffected pupils and which has gained recognition from Google for its outstanding achievements, struggling to find the money to provide a promised for its classes.

My constituents will notice a lack of investment in small-scale capital highways projects. Instead of inadequate roads being rebuilt, all we get is a pothole grant to fill in the gaps temporarily. They will of course notice that, while Ipswich Borough Council will continue to build as many houses as it can afford, there will be no national fund to enable the far more rapid creation of the houses so desperately needed for current and future young families. If they run their own small business, they will notice that the Chancellor has done nothing to end the scourge of late payment, which so often brings otherwise perfectly sound businesses to, or over, the brink of bankruptcy.

I believe that Ipswich will thrive in the end—I believe in my town—but I know it would thrive a whole lot sooner if we had a Government who believed in this country.

5.25 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I rise to speak up for the Budget. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), who identified a
number of important issues, which illustrates how there is always more to be done. There are some things in the Budget about which I am really enthusiastic, and there are some things about which I would like to ask Ministers questions.

I very warmly welcome the freeze on fuel duty. Private car use is not a “nice to have” in rural Stirlingshire; it is an absolute necessity. Will my hon. Friend the Minister look again at the extent of the rural fuel rebate scheme? There are some glaring anomalies in my part of the world, so I urge him to take another look at that.

I also warmly welcome the freeze on beer duty and spirits duty. That may sound strange coming from a teetotaller, but it is good news for Stirling, where there are more than 100 pubs and thousands of people are employed in the leisure sector. It is also good news for Stirling’s distillers and brewers.

I welcome the announcement of funding for universal credit, about which I have spoken several times in the House. Helping people to get into work and making sure that there is always pay is something that we must get right. I also welcome the commitment to spend more on our defences. The Government recognise the changing landscape of threat to which we must respond as a nation.

I commend the Chancellor and his team for taking seriously the plight of the high street. As a Conservative I find it a strange sensation to welcome the very idea of a new tax, but the introduction of an online tax for internet giants will do something to level the playing field in respect of the massive online retailers and high street retailers. It is an essential and pragmatic approach that I hope will be part of an overarching modernisation of the business-tax regime.

I have mentioned before in the House King Street, one of Stirling’s main shopping thoroughfares that has many retail and leisure properties. Some of them, although not many, receive rates relief through the small business bonus scheme. However, they would all benefit from the one-third reduction in rates that we will see in England. That would save restaurants such as Monterey Jack’s or shops such as Contempo across the other side of King Street about £3,000 a year. Those are real numbers that could be to the advantage of retailers in Stirling, if the Scottish Government adopted the policy for England. It is time to take action on the high street. We need vision and imagination for the future of our high streets. I see so much going on in the Budget that Scotland will not benefit from unless the Scottish Government show some of the invention and imagination that we heard from the Chancellor on Monday.

I have three questions that I hope the Minister will consider. I welcome the £200 million for the British Business Bank and the setting up of a British Business Bank in Scotland, but I remain concerned that we need to do more to create a bigger stream of high-quality patient capital. The British Business Bank is a good vehicle, but it needs a broader remit. There is yet more to do than the European Investment Fund that is not a source of patient capital. What is the Minister’s assessment of the ready availability and quality of patient capital in our economy?

It is right that we have an industrial strategy for the whole UK and an industrial strategy challenge fund for the whole UK, but I seek the Minister’s assurance that the UK shared prosperity fund will be a UK-wide fund, unlike the national productivity investment fund. My heart skipped a beat when I heard about the £200 million to be invested in rural broadband—full fibre broadband; the real McCoy—but then I learned that it was to be funded by the national productivity investment fund, which means that Scotland will not get anything. I deeply regret that. I am looking for assurances from the Treasury Bench about what will be done to get rural broadband planted in rural Scotland. Currently, the Scottish Government are doing next to nothing. They are frustrating the work of connecting rural Scotland.

I will take this opportunity to mention a side issue, which is the misleading advertising that our consumers are subject to on “superfast fibre” broadband, when it is not fibre at all—it is copper. We should insist on these companies telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to our consumers.

5.30 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): As we are discussing business today, it is worth mentioning the significant announcement just this afternoon that Channel Four Television has made the brilliant decision to move to the wonderful city of Leeds. I hope that this language is not too unparliamentary, but I am as chuffed as nuts about the news. I have supported this bid all the way through, and I pay tribute to the staff and the leadership that have made it a success. The bid was submitted by Leeds city region, and I am really looking forward to my constituents benefiting for decades to come and to West Yorkshire becoming an even greater bastion of creativity.

Let us return to the substantive subject before us: austerity and this Budget. After eight long years of constant cuts, austerity has not worked for Britain and it has not worked for my constituency. Our local hospital, Dewsbury and District, has had services removed and downgraded; our high streets are losing banks and post offices; our local authority, Kirklees, has been stripped back to the bone, with 50% cuts since 2010, and there are still millions of pounds worth of cuts to fight and who knows where they will come from in the coming years; and homelessness has doubled. I cannot forget the head teacher of one of our best schools in the constituency telling me that they have exhausted their ability to make savings around the edges. They have increased class sizes to such an extent that now all they can do is remove the whole German language department to balance the books. There seems to be something particularly cruel about allowing children to start educational discovery of another language only to have it whipped from underneath them owing to funding cuts from this Government.

The biggest immediate crisis facing my constituents is that of universal credit. The fact is that there is not enough money in the system and its harsh and failing structure is causing pain in communities such as mine. This is not just an academic exercise for accountants; it is about people like us—people like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and those on the Conservative Benches. They are people with families, hopes and ambitions.
If the House will allow me, I would just like to share a couple of examples from my own constituency. One constituent was forced to sell off his white goods and furniture to pay rent and bills. Another constituent, a former carer, Carol, who recently retired on grounds of ill health, has had to wait eight weeks and counting with not a penny of income. We are trying our best to support her, but an eviction scare is on the horizon, which is absolutely impacting on her health. She has sold off all her jewellery and clothing; she has nothing left to sell. We must be able to do better than that. These cases are unfair and unjust.

I dread to think what people like Carol and the others would do if it were not for the food banks. I know that the people of Batley and Spen owe enormous gratitude to the volunteers at Batley food bank, who keep helping and keep supporting in the face of rising demand. Demand is up 50% on this time last year, and the volunteers are helping more than 100 adults and 40 children—let that land: 40 children. In the past two days alone, while we have been listening to and debating this Budget, the volunteers have helped 26 adults and 14 children. For some, going to the food bank is acute humiliation. One food bank volunteer told me of a middle-aged father of two who was out of work for the first time having been diagnosed with cancer. Waiting for his first welfare payment, he had nothing left for food for his family. He arrived at the food bank asking for help, but it was too much and he left saying, “I don’t want to be here. It’s embarrassing. I have worked all my life; I can’t do this.” The volunteer followed him, running into the street saying, “It’s society that should be ashamed, not you.” It is heartbreaking and it is unacceptable.

We are discussing business and, briefly, I would like to mention the plight of our nurseries in Batley and Spen and across the country. The fate of many nurseries is set by the decisions of this Government. A rise in the minimum wage is of course very welcome, but common sense suggests that it should come at the same time as an uplift in funding for childcare. My real fear is that, with the extra pressure on budgets, many excellent nurseries will go out of business in the most deprived areas, where parents are unable to afford top-ups and where children benefit the most. Those businesses are calling out for support, and they are not alone. There might be fewer potholes, but the social injustice facing our country remains unanswered, and that is just not good enough.

5.35 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Just over a month ago, in Birmingham, the Prime Minister trumpeted that austerity was finally over. On Monday, in his Budget statement, the Chancellor was more sanguine, claiming that austerity was not over but “coming to an end”. Perhaps most disappointing was the disingenuous claim that austerity had been a necessity, that there was no choice and, indeed, that austerity had not been driven by ideology.

Let us be clear, austerity is and was a choice. The path chosen by the Chancellor’s predecessor, George Osborne, was totally opposite to that chosen in the US, where Barack Obama introduced the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, a Keynesian package of economic stimulus that has resulted in the highest and most sustained recovery of all G7 countries in the period since the global financial crash—and it was a global financial crash, irrespective of what the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) may say.

Monday’s Budget announcement was particularly important, because we are at a pivotal point—a point at which the economy is faltering, and where we face huge uncertainty and, according to the Office for National Statistics, the most serious economic damage from Brexit of between a 2% and 8% drop in gross domestic product, depending on the deal. In fact, UK growth is the lowest of the G7 countries—almost half that of the EU composite and more than half that of the US and the OECD countries.

Our benign growth has been kept afloat these past years by consumers enjoying super-low interest rates and sizeable gains from windfall payments due to the banks and other financial institutions’ mis-selling of payment protection insurance—some £40 billion so far, and another £18 billion likely, according to recent reports. Even before the additional sum, that equates to between 1% and 2% of GDP, or an additional £1,000 for every adult in this country. That is a significant sum; a significant stimulus. I shall use two sectors to evidence the impact of such sums on the economy: record sales of cars and new kitchens in recent years, as consumers have cashed in on those payments to finance high-ticket items.

Now we face reality: consumer confidence is trending downwards and is not far off the level it was at in 2010. New car sales, generally a good proxy for consumer confidence, were down 20% in September and 8% year on year. Household debt is rising at an alarming rate, unsecured debt in particular—debt because people cannot afford to live. Universal credit is hurting, not helping, and with the rising use of food banks and the explosion in the use of payday lenders, the pressure on households is greater than ever as more and more people face the phenomenon of in-work poverty. Also, as the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) highlighted, savings have fallen dramatically in the past year or two.

The claim by the Chancellor that we are witnessing a jobs miracle is yet another line from the George Osborne songbook. This is no jobs miracle; it is a jobs mirage. How else do we account for underemployed, zero-houred and insecure employment? There is low capital investment because labour is so cheap and flexible in the UK—easy to hire, easy to fire, so why invest in machinery and plant that could improve productivity? It is not a productivity puzzle; it is simple.

Elsewhere, we are seeing lay-offs and shutdowns in the jewel of our manufacturing sector, the car industry. Production was down 17% in September, 7% in the year to date, and by 19% in our domestic market. Clearly, there are particular issues with testing regimes but, beyond doubt, the introduction in last November’s Budget statement of a hike in vehicle excise duty on diesel has beyond doubt, the introduction in last November’s Budget statement of a hike in vehicle excise duty on diesel has been particularly damaging to the UK car industry, especially Jaguar Land Rover. Without the revenues and the profit, there can be no investment in the transition from the internal combustion engine to alternative fuels. That is what the industry sought from the Chancellor—support, not damage.

While I am disappointed by the lack of immediate support for the car industry—a sector so vital not only to the UK economy but to the people of Warwick and
Leamington—the failure of this Budget to address the desperate needs of our schools, police and fire and rescue services is just as notable. Without the investment in our children’s education, our health service, our security and our infrastructure, we will fail tomorrow. Expenditure now—investment—is the lifeblood of our future. Giving £110 billion in corporate tax giveaways by the end of this Parliament denies us the means to do this. Somehow the Chancellor believes that £10,000 for a primary school to help with those “little extras” like books and pens is good governance; try telling that to the children who have lost their teaching assistant.

In years to come, economic historians will come to view this period as the UK’s lost decade—years when so much could have been achieved had the trajectory of growth of late 2009 and early 2010 been maintained. It was stifled by ideology; a Government in the spirit of the children who have lost their teaching assistant. The cuts to local authority budgets, whether £169 million from Camden’s budget or £164 million from Brent’s budget, are resulting in the closure of police stations, fire stations and jobcentres in the most deprived parts of my constituency, as well as the closure of the children’s centres that are a lifeline for so many parents in my constituency. To top it all off, the roll-out of universal credit is coming. Of course, it would be remiss of me not to mention also the financial difficulties that Brexit will bring to my constituency—a constituency that so thoroughly rejected the idea that we have to leave the European Union: 75% of my constituents voted to remain in the EU.

These issues will dominate life in Hampstead and Kilburn for everyone, but the financial difficulties that I have outlined will have the most profound effect on the people in my constituency who are facing such financial difficulties. As anyone who knows my constituency will probably acknowledge, there is a lot of divided opinion among lots of people, with differences of opinion that constituents like to email and write to me about—but one thing on which many of us are united is that the Government’s economic policy on migration should be underpinned by tolerance and open-mindedness, and that we should be helping new communities who are coming into our constituencies and our country to settle.

That is why I was so deeply disappointed that in his speech on Monday the Chancellor did not talk about reinstating the migration impacts fund. Conservative Members have said a lot about what the Labour Government did, no doubt as set out by the Whips. Let me tell them that the Labour Government introduced the migration impacts fund, in response to councils’ requests for relief from pressures on public services. Better yet, the fund was self-financing. It was financed by non-EU migrants, with a compulsory £50 levy applied to application fees. For me, it was a statement of intent from the Labour Government that we wanted to express our values by welcoming migrant communities to come to this country. But the coalition Government decided to cut this fund because they wanted to take urgent action to cut the deficit, and because it was “not a priority funding stream”.

That was typical of this Government, because they cut it first and then faced the expensive consequences later. Disgracefully, the fund was scrapped, but the financial levy remained on those seeking to make a life in Britain—again, very indicative of the punitive economic approach this Government take to migration.

Obviously, however, the needs of the new communities that were coming in remained, and the Government decided to bring in a new scheme, but it was wholly inadequate. Last year, the Home Affairs Committee said that this scheme—the controlling migration fund—suggested that the Government had lost the argument on this topic and that its scope was not "sufficient to address the...pressures...on local public services". This should come as no surprise. The successor scheme that was brought in so hastily by the Government is barely more generous than the migration impacts fund introduced in 2008, and it cannot conceivably be expected to meet the much larger demands on public services a decade later.

The underfunding of the CMF is compounded by the fact that the scheme is split into two, with around £40 million being spent on immigration enforcement, rather than where it should be going, on projects to ease the process of integration across the country. It should come as no surprise that a More United survey of 17,000 people found that the restoration of the initial migration impacts fund would improve trust in our country’s approach to migration.

This is an historic time for our country, and we need a shake-up of our migration policy. We need a Government who think about building resilience in local communities, so that when there is an influx of new migrants and new communities, there are the financial resources to meet the challenges adequately. I represent 22,000 EU nationals in my constituency, and I want to welcome more. I expect the Government to be making provisions in the Budget to ensure that we have the resilience in our communities to handle the influx of migrants who will ultimately bring so many benefits to our country.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Budget, as we all know, delivered a pathetic £400 million for schools, which many professionals have said is an insult when they are facing staff redundancies and cuts to pastoral and special needs services. Indeed, Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said:

“Many public services are going to feel squeezed for some time to come. Cuts are not about to be reversed. If I were a prison governor, a local authority chief executive or a headteacher I would struggle to find much to celebrate. I would be preparing for more difficult years ahead.”

That needs to be seen against the backdrop of an 8% cut to school funding in real terms since 2010. As the National Audit Office has made clear, £6.7 billion is needed to bring English school buildings up to a satisfactory standard. That capital funding shortfall is made worse by the £3.7 billion cut from the capital budget since 2010. This has left three schools in my constituency—Belmont Community School, St Leonard’s...
and Framwellgate School—in urgent need of replacement, but the Government continually say that there is no money to pay for replacement.

This is not just about cuts in capital funding. In September this year, the cabinet member for children and young people’s services in Durham County Council wrote to the Secretary of State for Education. In a very detailed letter, she set out the impact in Durham of the cuts to education, estimating that the council had lost £46 million from the schools budget, which equates to a loss of 15 teaching staff in a secondary school. She pleaded with the Government to listen to authorities such as Durham and to provide more funding, so that young people in Durham can get the education they deserve.

We know that further education fares even worse from this Budget. There has been a 45% cut in real terms to adult education and apprenticeships and a 12% cut to student funding for 16 to 18-year-olds. The Government need to explain how much of the figure outlined for skilled jobs and apprenticeships will go to colleges to support them as they seek to do the important job of skilling and reskilling adults and young people, so that they add to a dynamic workforce for the future. Even if they get all the £125 million, FE colleges will still have lost £3 billion since 2010.

I am also concerned that the Chancellor has done nothing to reduce the burden of debt on university students, particularly to lower the crippling interest rates applied to student loans. Some of the money in the Budget for start-ups, research and development of technology might end up in universities: again, that is not clear. It would be good to know how much will go to the HE sector, and we especially expect more detail about university funding after the post-18 review has reported.

In the last minute or so of my speech, I want to say something about cuts to local government. We all know that local government has borne the brunt of cuts, losing 60% of its funding. It is absolutely outrageous that the Government did nothing in the Budget to try to bring about a fairer system of funding for local government. Councils such as Durham are dealing with increasing pressures on social care and on young people’s and children’s care services. There was hardly a mention of that in the Budget, despite the massive cuts to and the shortfall in local government funding, which is estimated to be £7.8 billion by 2024-25. The Exchequer Secretary is not listening at the moment, but I do hope that he will read this speech in Hansard and come back to the House with a commitment on how the Government will make up the shortfall to local government funding so my constituents can get the services they deserve and need.

5.50 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and to contribute to this Budget debate. I wish to focus my remarks on three main aspects: Brexit, the north Wales economy and the voluntary sector.

The Financial Times has already referred to the Budget as a general election Budget. I do not know whether that is true, but it is most certainly a Brexit Budget, and I am not thinking of the new 50p pieces. Quite frankly, if that were all the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had to do to keep their ideological, hard Brexiteers happy, most of us would not mind too much. We now see more than £4 billion—about £2.2 billion, I think—going towards Brexit preparations. This is from a Government who have categorically refused either to have a general election or to ask the British people in a referendum what we should do next vis-à-vis Brexit. One leading voluntary sector commentator offered a very sobering reflection when he wrote:

“The opportunity cost of spending that money is staggering. It’s equivalent to the total income of the UK’s 136,000 smallest charities for almost two years. Just think what they could do for communities with that.”

Indeed, let us just think about that.

On a more positive note, I welcome the fact that persistent local lobbying has led to the Chancellor announcing money for the north Wales growth deal. This, as I think they say in the wedding banns, is for the third time of asking: the deal has been mentioned twice, but this is the first time we have had any money for it. Members of Parliament from north Wales have worked across party and geography to fight for funding. I want to put on record my thanks for the part that local authority leaders and business people on the North Wales economic ambition board have played. I must, however, say of the funding that Belfast, which has a population of 333,000, has been pledged £350 million for its city deal, but north Wales, with a population of 687,000, has been pledged £120 million. I have nothing against the people of Belfast, but that does not seem to me to be very fair. We in north Wales will do everything we can to work with the Government and whoever else we need to work with to secure prosperity and wellbeing across our region. The North Wales economic ambition board has already stated, in the aftermath of the Budget, that our goal is to increase the value of the north Wales economy from £13.6 billion in 2016 to £26 billion by 2035, with a final deal in place later in 2019. It is an ambitious challenge, but one we are determined to meet.

I will now turn briefly to the voluntary sector. In advance of this year’s Budget, the all-party group on charities and volunteering, of which I am a co-chair, wrote to the Chancellor with some very helpful suggestions. I am pleased to see that our suggestion that the increase in the gift aid small donation scheme maximum from £20 to £30 has been taken up as a proposal. That is good, and it is a sensible measure. I think that all parliamentarians involved with the all-party group, as well as our several hundred affiliate members from the voluntary sector, will welcome the Chancellor’s words about reducing “administrative burdens on charities” by introducing a “package of measures” from April 2019. We await the details but welcome the principle. However, I am rather less enthused by the increasing tendency for Chancellors to pick specific charities and causes. When any charity gets funding in any Budget, I welcome it, but we know that, in all likelihood, such charities will not get this on a year-on-year basis. That approach can raise serious problems of financial stability for charities, and it goes against the Government’s own—largely, very thoughtful—civil society strategy.

If the Government are serious about the voluntary sector in the long term, we cannot have another Budget that does not seriously examine dormant assets. The voluntary sector...
sector has waited a long time to hear how the Government intend to further spend up to £2 billion in dormant assets. Voluntary sector leaders are absolutely right to call, as they did in a letter to the Chancellor, for that funding to be designated for the purposes of strategic long-term investment in civil society organisations. It is also time for the Government to add to that funding £500 million from the national fund, to be released for the purpose of investing in communities. There is no greater role, no higher calling, than for us to invest in our communities.

5.55 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):
I would say that it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, but it clearly is not. This is a horrendous time for many people in this country. They were told that the people with the broadest shoulders would bear the biggest burden of austerity, and that proved to be completely untrue. They were told that the situation would be temporary while the Tories rebuilt the economy and created the jobs of the future and that those jobs would be available to hard-working people. That turned out to be untrue, too. Then we were told that austerity was over. The Budget has shown in black and white that that is simply not true.

There is a human cost. It is natural in these situations to look at the facts, the figures and the data. But just think about the human, lived experience in every one of our communities—of people doing exactly what the Government have asked them to do. They are working hard, often in two or three jobs and often for more than 40 hours a week. They are struggling with childcare and to put food on the table. They do it because they have the pride of work.

We might say that, given the exploitation taking place in which people are not given full-time work, even though it is available from the employer, those people ought not have pride in their work—their terms and conditions have been eroded or they are being paid the minimum wage because employers know they will get away with it—but people do have pride. People in my town of Oldham came from all over the world to work hard and set up a new life for themselves and their families. They are industrious and take pride in their work and effort. But the promise of fair pay for a fair day’s work is just not true for too many people.

When the mills were thriving, we developed manufacturing and engineering. The jobs in aerospace, making high-end machinery that changed the face of the world, did not just provide quality goods that changed the world; they provided a sense of purpose. The things that people produced in towns such as Oldham helped set the industrial revolution off and set this country where it needed to be. But those very same communities have been left abandoned.

What has followed that industrialisation? The decent jobs have been replaced with warehousing and distribution jobs—the same jobs that Amazon and the like are replacing with automation. Take Shop Direct in my community: it employs 2,000 people in warehousing and distribution. Some of them have 40 years’ service; it used to be Littlewoods and Great Universal Stores. They had a long history in Greater Manchester: 40 years’ service—husbands and wives working together all their working lives. That operation is closing, to be relocated 80 miles away at an automated plant.

We know that progress is inevitable and that automation would make this country more productive and the workforce know that, too. They do not have their heads in the sand—they work in the industry on a daily basis and know exactly what changes are taking place—but what they cannot understand is why their tax-haven owners are closing the local facility and not even giving the community the chance to put in an offer of a site in that community for a new facility. Where is the fairness in that?

We talk about fair taxation. This digital sales tax being proposed is an absolute con. For too long, the tech giants have got away with not paying their fair amount of tax, while our high streets, our city centres and our town centres have been left to go to their knees. In many regions, we have lost a quarter of our retail space. That has a real consequence for how people feel about their communities. When they look at their town, it is a test for what the future holds for their place and their community. When they see the shutters down and the boards on the windows, it says a lot about the faith the Government have in it. At the same time, where money is being generated in the economy, the Government are completely useless in capturing it to invest in decent public services.

The people in this country believe in fairness and fair play. They understand there are choices and they understand that sometimes they are difficult choices. What they will never understand is how they work hard, work long hours and work still with pride, yet the people taking money out of their community are not paying their fair share to pay for decent public services. That is not for themselves. People are not selfish. People look at their children and their grandchildren, and they look at the funding that has been taken away from our schools. That is when they question what the future is and whether it is all worth it. If the Government do not do something quick to give people back the hope they need, I really fear for the future of this country.

6 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon).

I have to say that I am disappointed by the Budget, although I am not surprised by its failure to set out any meaningful change in policy. As other hon. Members have said, this is a broken promises Budget. Austerity is not over and there is no sign that it will be over any time soon. Cuts to social security will continue and there are no guarantees that other Government Departments will not face cuts as well. The Government have presided over eight years of economic failure. Their failed austerity agenda has deeply damaged our economy, delayed and weakened our recovery, and endlessly postponed fixing the deficit. It is important to see beyond the deliberate attempts to distract the media and voters with relatively small sums of money spent on one or two high-profile items. Frankly, I have to say that even many of those are derisory. Instead, I would like to focus on what is missing from the Budget.

First, it is significant that there are no guarantees that Departments will not face further cuts. That the Chancellor has raided capital budgets to fund day-to-day spending
makes matters even worse. The £1.7 billion promised for universal credit is less than a third of the social security cuts still to come and the Chancellor’s announcement on work allowances reverses just over half the cuts made in 2015. The roll-out of universal credit has now been delayed for the seventh time. On this measure, universal credit is clearly failing. It is clear that it needs to be scrapped.

What about the NHS? Under the current Government, the NHS has experienced the slowest spending growth in its history. The £20 billion promised for the NHS is “simply not enough” according to the Health Foundation. It is clear that there is a real need for much greater spending just to keep pace with the needs of our ageing population.

What does the Budget have to say about schools? The Chancellor’s plans did not include a penny for the day-to-day costs for our schools, even though school funding has been cut by 8%. The “little extras” announced by the Chancellor will be seen as a drop in the ocean and something of an insult to many hardworking teachers, parents and children. It will not stop schools having to send begging letters to parents to cover basic expenses, which in my area includes paper and printing.

What about local government, policing and public sector pay? Local councils face a funding gap of £7.8 billion by 2025. There was not a penny for policing, even though 21,000 police officers have been cut and violent crime is on the rise. Police, teachers, nurses and doctors have had no reassurance that the public sector pay squeeze will end this year. Indeed, the Budget failed to address the very real needs of my constituency. My constituents will not be helped by this Budget. It is a budget that fails even on its own terms.

The Chancellor has tried to distract us with a shower of gimmicks. This failed and divided Government claim that austerity is ending when some of the deepest cuts are yet to come. The Government are failing to deliver a fair economy, failing to end austerity and failing to agree a Brexit deal. It is high time they made way for a party willing and able to address the very real problems facing our country today.

6.4 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I draw hon. Members’ attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The Government’s party conference this summer boasted of opportunity, but this week’s Budget smacks of a wasted opportunity. It is a wasted opportunity to present an economy that embraces the challenges and sees them as opportunities for all, and it fails to address the urgent threat of climate change or the chance to reskill for automation. It is a vision lacking in imagination on how to renew our towns beyond rate reductions. There is a much-needed and overdue injection of cash for our NHS, but the King’s Fund and the Health Foundation say that it is still not enough. The party that says “F— business” on Brexit still gives us FA for FE, with colleges not even mentioned. There is no intervention to move from low-skilled to high-skilled work and no plan for the rise of the robots and the promise of AI and automation. Wages and growth are not moving and public services continue to be ignored. Austerity continues—it does not end—and the Government have no vision for what is next.

There is more money for potholes than for schools—is there a better metaphor for what this Tory decade has become, plugging the holes after years of neglect and being run over? There is yet more evidence of the Government taking councils such as mine in Bury to breaking point, with £100 million ripped from Bury’s local services from 2010 to 2020. That is 80% of the council’s budget gone on their watch.

Just three weeks after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s landmark report highlighting the grave threat of climate change, there was not a single reference to climate change in the Chancellor’s speech. There is nothing on investing in new national industries or renewable energy and the creation of new jobs, and there is nothing to tackle air pollution and the chaos facing commuters in Bury or on plans to switch polluting buses to new, clean-energy vehicles.

The Chancellor’s 1.5% average growth for the next five years will not stand a chance, with or without a Brexit deal. Talk of a Brexit dividend hits the pit of my stomach when I recall what the real job creators in Bury tell me. Of course, some certainty will bring economic relief, but to limit our ambitions for the economy to this is another wasted opportunity. I join local shopkeepers in welcoming the planned cut in business rates, but the Budget does not do enough to back entrepreneur centres such as Bury. Good economic growth needs these nimble-footed risk takers. We need emerging entrepreneurs getting access to finance so that they can grow with loans that do not put the family home on the line or cost the earth to take out. Many entrepreneurs come home after a day at work and log on to sell, serve or trade once the kids are in bed.

As a country, we have the lowest business investment in the G7, while public sector investment is now £18 billion lower than in 2010. The OBR says that we are facing the biggest wage slump in 200 years. Payday is ever further away for so many. Costs soar. Homelessness can now be found in towns as well as cities and baby banks for baby clothes are joining food banks.

This wasted opportunity Budget failed to address the urgent crisis facing education. The obnoxious phrase that defines the Budget was the “little extras”. There is nothing to plug a £2 billion-a-year funding shortfall and the 8% real-terms cut in per-pupil funding. Why have the Government got such a blind spot on further education and sixth-form colleges, with spending per student set to return next year to the level that it was 30 years ago?

We know this: we cannot expect a family that is just about managing to get to the end of the month to be served or understood by a Government trying to survive to the end of March. The challenges that we face as a country are imperative, but the answers that we get in this Budget are impotent. This is a wasted opportunity, from a wasted opportunity of a Government.

6.9 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I also want to share with hon. Members the excitement in Bristol at the news today that one of Channel Four’s creative hubs will be relocating to our wonderful, creative and diverse city. We thank our Mayor, Marvin Rees, and his team for securing such a win for Bristol.
My reaction to the Budget is less positive, because it was a Budget of bad jokes and little else. It failed to recognise the biggest issues facing the economy—economic growth, Brexit, austerity and climate change—and then failed to set out what we were doing about them. On economic growth, it is a plain and simple fact that we have gone from being one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world to one of the slowest. We rely on economic growth to fund our public services, and many workers in Bristol are already taxed enough, at a time of stagnant or painfully growing salaries and a rising cost of living.

How do we grow investment in our economy and generate the growth to fund the public services that the British people expect? Private sector investment is significantly down, having been decoupled from the global investment cycle, whereas in the United States and Germany we are seeing much higher investment. In my constituency in the industrial zone of Avonmouth, I have businesses that are ready to invest in jobs and growth but unwilling to do so because of the risks facing the British economy. State-backed investment under the Government is a self-defeating spiral. They are borrowing more than £1 trillion—50% more than when Labour was in government—without having achieved any significant sustainable economic growth off the back of it.

That takes me to the next elephant in the room, which is Brexit. Never has a modern British Government implemented a strategy that has proactively sought to make us poorer and less powerful. The Treasury has already earmarked £4.2 billion to administer Brexit, and it has not secured agreement on our future relationship, which will create even more cost for businesses and workers. Our trajectory has proven the original forecasts from the Bank of England—that Brexit would make the economy 2% smaller and cost around £20 billion in available taxes to spend per year—absolutely right and nothing to do with “Project Fear” and has proven the promise of a Brexit dividend a fiction that many will not forget. That is why I and others have long supported the promise of a Brexit dividend a fiction that many will not forget. That is why I and others have long supported the promise of a Brexit dividend a fiction that many will not forget. That is why I and others have long supported the promise of a Brexit dividend a fiction that many will not forget. That is why I and others have long supported the promise of a Brexit dividend a fiction that many will not forget.

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Finally, on austerity, the Prime Minister sold us a fiction, as we have heard time and again in this debate. The plain and simple truth is that austerity has not ended—it is not even on the path to ending. The Budget did nothing for police or fire services in Avon and Somerset, at a time of rising crime when many victims are being left entirely alone and without access to justice; it did nothing to help Bristol City Council to provide the statutory services that so many children, vulnerable people and older people rely on, in the face of £70 million of cuts since 2010; and it offended every single school up and down the country and in Bristol by giving them less money than they are giving for potholes so that they can buy the “extra things” they think might be nice, when we need teachers, teaching assistants and support for children with additional needs who are being failed. The NHS secured some additional funding, but it has already been shown to be a real-terms cut, and this Government is a self-defeating spiral. They are borrowing more than £1 trillion—50% more than when Labour was in government—without having achieved any significant sustainable economic growth off the back of it.

Fourteen neighbourhoods in my constituency are in the lowest 10% in the country for education, training and skills, and six of them are in the lowest 10% for employment. I come from those neighbourhoods. Week in, week out, constituents come to me facing the consequences of nearly a decade of austerity. Week in, week out, all I can say to them is that the Government are not good enough. That is why I say the Budget was a Budget of bad jokes and little else; that is why I say I am amazed at the Government’s incompetence in administering Brexit and their apparent lack of concern at its cost; that is why I say that the promise that austerity is over is a fiction that will not easily be forgotten by my constituents or the British people; and that is why I cannot support this short-sighted, incompetent, Brexit-driven, fictitious Budget that fails to recognise and deal with the challenges this country faces.

6.14 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and to share in his delight that Glasgow is to be the home of the other Channel Four creative hub—a great triumph for a city that has built an incredible reputation for communications and broadcasting over the past 50 years, as the home of BBC Scotland and STV. I am sure it will help to bring a far greater breadth of expression to public service broadcasting, particularly from working-class voices, which are too often shut out of mainstream media in this country. That is a great opportunity for us all.

I reflect on the past 10 years—I started university in 2008, the same year that Northern Rock collapsed and the banking crisis erupted on this country—and the impact that that had on my generation, in our formative years. I think of the efforts that the British Government made at that time to command the global response, to ensure that the G20 responded with a counter-cyclical growth strategy, and to introduce stimulus that returned the UK economy to growth in record time. That was the picture when the Labour Government left office in 2010, to be succeeded by a Tory-led coalition, which rapidly imposed a programme of austerity on this country, claiming that there was no alternative.

Well, the alternative has been proven to have failed, and this Budget is testimony to that failure. It has failed our public finances. The Tories have missed every target they set themselves for fiscal recovery. They were meant to eliminate the deficit by 2015, but the Office for Budget Responsibility described achieving that by 2025 as a “challenging” objective. If they succeed, it will be by shifting the deficit on to the balance sheets of our underfunded schools, hospitals, local councils, police forces and other public services across the country. The Tories will have handed out £110 billion in corporate tax giveaways by the end of this Parliament. Choosing tax giveaways for the few over public services for the many is unjust, and certainly irresponsible.

Austerity has failed our economy. Average growth between 1945 and 2009 was 2.4%; between 2010 and 2016 it was just 2% and it is not forecast to rise above 1.6% for any of the next five years. That is a failure in the growth opportunity of this country, and it is a failure of my generation, who have been betrayed by the economically illiterate policy of austerity that has been visited on this country.
Think of the lost opportunity, Mr Deputy Speaker. Millions of young people across this country have been betrayed by that lost opportunity. For the first time, we expect my generation to be poorer than our own parents. That is simply a shameful indictment of this Government’s failure to deliver investment in this country. Indeed, real wage growth between 1946 and 2010 was 2.4% every year, on average, but between 2010 and 2018 pay has actually fallen in this country, by 3%. That means that 6 million people earn less than the real living wage. When this Government boast of record employment levels in this country, we have to reflect that, actually, coming up to half of the workers in this country are on less than £13,000 a year. That is a low-wage economy of penury, imposed by this Government, who have utterly failed to deliver for working-class people. It is shameful.

The UK is the only major economy in which investment is falling. UK business investment is the lowest in the G7, and public sector investment is over £18 billion lower today than in 2010. That is the root cause of the problem. We are using low wages to subsidise industry, not investing in high productivity that will deliver the real economic benefits for everyone in this country. That is why British productivity remains 15% lower than the other major economies. There is a vicious cycle of economic decline under this Government.

By contrast, our party’s policies propose a virtuous cycle of recovery that will improve lives for everyone. We were on that growth trajectory when we left office last time.

I would particularly like to reflect on the impact in Scotland. We have heard about £959 million in Barnett consequentials, but that is a drop in the ocean relative to what is necessary to truly transform the Scottish economy. It is a drop in the ocean relative to the £33 billion budget that the Scottish Government manage. It also pales into insignificance beside the £70 billion programme of investment that Labour proposes to bring about in Scotland over the next 10 years. That would be the radical transformation that is really required in the Scottish economy. We have seen efforts to invest in Belfast, with attempts to regenerate the city in the wake of a devastating fire, yet nothing from this Government after the devastating Glasgow School of Art fire.

Universal credit is about to roll out in my constituency, where I will have the highest number of universal credit claimants in Scotland—over 16,000. We have seen no effort to address the huge shortfall of over £7 billion of welfare cuts that this Government have made. That is the reality of Tory austerity in this country.

6.20 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have the dubious honour of being the final speaker in this debate. [HON. MEMBERS: “No, you’re not.”] There is not much in this Budget to excite me or my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran. We are no wiser as to when the Ayrshire growth deal will kick off. If warm words were investment we would have made huge progress with this deal, but we need more than warm words and good wishes to improve the lives of those living in the communities crying out for investment, like Saltcoats, Kilbirnie, Stevenston.

We have had some tinkering with universal credit, but nothing like what is needed, nor have any measures been taken, despite repeated demands, to pause and halt this benefit in order to make it fit for purpose. Nothing has been done to end the wage discrimination against young people, and the Government continue to perpetuate the myth of their national living wage when it is clear that the real living wage—the wage that takes into account the actual cost of living—is the right thing for workers. The Tories and the Labour party are still opposing the Scottish Parliament having this authority over wage levels, there is no commitment to end exploitative unpaid work trials and still no support for the Scottish Parliament to have any control over employment law.

Such is the terror of Scotland being a beacon of progressive politics in this regard that presumably the logic is, “If we go down, we all go down together.”

We have had much talk today about welfare. The £30 billion of welfare cuts voted through in 2015 by both Labour and the Tories has exacerbated child poverty in my constituency, and yesterday’s Budget did nothing to target child poverty. We have been told by the Resolution Foundation that tax cuts overwhelmingly benefit richer households, with almost half of them set to go to the top 10% of households, yet, disappointingly, we hear that Labour will abstain on that—and that is particularly disappointing given that Labour in Scotland have been throwing up their hands in horror at the SNP Government not raising taxes to yet higher levels.

The Budget did nothing to address the £175 million paid by Police Scotland in VAT bills, coming straight out of frontline policing, at the same time as we have academy schools in England being given special dispensation from paying VAT. Perhaps someone on the Government Benches could explain that anomaly.

We have had nothing for the victims of the HELMS—Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—green deal swindle, which left people with huge debts. We also have communities without their banks, like Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie. The Chancellor has given us no guarantees over the future sale of RBS shares to safeguard the interests of the taxpayer. We have had nothing for the WASPI women, who have been robbed—mugged—of thousands of pounds. We have had nothing on the civil nuclear police officers, who face dramatic and unsustainable changes to their pensions.

The decision in the Budget to press ahead with the pensions cold-calling ban is welcome. However, if the reason for this ban is to protect people from these calls—and I assume it is—I cannot help but wonder at the delay in implementing my own ten-minute rule Bill from 2016, which called for director-level responsibility for nuisance calls. The UK Government support this and have repeatedly said so. They even reprinted the Bill and put it in the name of one of their own Back-Bench MPs, which is ironic given that the Bill tries to deal with scamming, but still no date for implementation has been set.

The delay in reducing the stake for fixed odds betting terminals is appalling, because it is down to pressure exerted by Back-Bench Tory MPs who appear to be in thrall to the bookmaking industry. This is a pressing issue in my constituency because we have 135 of these machines, with local players losing an estimated £5 million on those terminals in 2016 alone, causing untold misery across our communities.

I could go on, but I will end by saying this: this Budget does almost nothing to improve the lives of my constituents and is a massive missed opportunity. I
think so and I am sure the majority of my constituents will think so, too. The Chancellor needs to go back to the drawing board.

6.23 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in favour of the Budget tonight. The decade since the financial crisis has been tough, and it is very good to know that the corner has been turned. The economy must come first, because without a strong economy we cannot afford other priorities such as healthcare, welfare, defence and education. Today in Chelmsford unemployment stands at 1.6%; we have record numbers of jobs and opportunities. We know that politicians do not make jobs—businesses do—but we can help. Businesses often tell me how low corporation taxes have helped them to invest here. Chelmsford businesses ask me for lower business rates, fixed VAT thresholds and a level playing field between online and offline trade, because tech giants should pay tax too. I am real glad that all three of those asks have been addressed in the Budget.

We know that innovation drives growth and keeps us ahead of the pack, and I am proud that this Government have increased investment in science and research by more than any Government in the past 40 years. We on this side do not underestimate the importance of collaboration in science, which is why our EU strategy keeps us in those European networks. I am glad that the Minister for Immigration is here. She knows that we keep us in those European networks. I am glad that the Minister for Immigration is here. She knows that we need a fair and fast immigration system to enable scientists to continue to come here.

Fundamental research in science is key. Ideas involving liquid crystals, molecular machines and gas phase chemistry were once just intellectual curiosities, but they have now driven real transformational breakthroughs. We need to ensure that the ideas we have here are made into reality here. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) dismissed quantum technology as a “sexy” sector, but my biggest employer in Chelmsford has embraced the quantum revolution. It has made the cold atom trap—

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way in what is the final Back-Bench speech of the debate. I feel that it is wholly unjustified to say that I should not call technology sexy. One of the things I would like to do as an engineer is to show people how sexy and important technology and engineering are. Calling it sexy was not dismissing it. I was just saying that we need to celebrate all different types of technology, not just quantum technology.

**Vicky Ford:** Maybe it was the tone that felt dismissive. In my constituency, we have embraced quantum technology. We are making a cold atom trap and the oscillator for a quantum clock. There is nothing wrong with being in a “sexy” sector. Last week, that employer called in 120 of its lowest-paid workers and gave them a pay rise of between 8% and 18%. These are real products, real sales, real profits and real pay rises. That is what will drive our country’s future.

I thank the Treasury for the investment in infrastructure. People in my constituency spend too much time in traffic jams and on delayed trains. It is a waste of their personal time and it hits the country’s productivity. We are building tens of thousands of homes in my constituency, and we need the infrastructure too. We need the second railway station and the north-east bypass, and we have got our bids in to the housing infrastructure fund—it is great to see that fund being increased—and the local roads fund. We need money for main roads, cash for cycleways and pounds for our potholes, but in Chelmsford, my pinch point is the ancient Army and Navy flyover. I want our local roads fund to be Ford’s flyover fund, please.

There are three other things in the Budget that I would really like to praise. The first is the tax on virgin plastics. We need a game changer in the way we use plastics on this planet, and I am really glad that Britain is leading the way on this. The second is the improvement in universal credit. That is welcomed not only by us on this side of the Chamber but by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and the Resolution Foundation. All those organisations are real experts in fighting poverty. The third thing is the massive boost for the NHS in the form of £20 billion for health and mental health, which is not funded through hiking up taxes. We are putting more money into the pockets of our lowest-paid workers by freezing and raising their tax thresholds.

There is a great deal in this Budget to be proud of, and I am proud to be the last Back-Bencher to speak in favour of it tonight.

6.29 pm

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I may not always agree with her—I do not agree with her assessment of the Budget—but I know that she is passionate about science. I fear she misunderstood: she has a shared passion for science with my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), particularly for quantum physics. Indeed, my hon. Friend has visited physics facilities in my constituency, so she and the hon. Member for Chelmsford are perfectly in accord.

We have heard some excellent contributions today, with important points being made on both sides of the House, and I will refer to as many of them as I can in the time available. As many Members have suggested, this is sadly a complacent Budget, and that accusation came not only from the Opposition during this debate. That complacency was perhaps at its starkest in the Chancellor’s assessment of our country’s economic health, and I was surprised to hear that repeated by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He is usually a stickler for detail, but he seemed to suggest this afternoon that the estimates underlying the Government’s plans could be revised upwards if a good deal was done with the EU. However, those estimates already presuppose that a deal along the lines advocated by his Prime Minister will be struck with the EU, a fact which is obviously being challenged by many Conservative Back Benchers. Such hubris is reckless in the extreme.

At the beginning of the Red Book, we see the claim that the Government’s approach has created a so-called “stronger and fairer economy”, but the statistics tell a different story, as we have heard throughout today’s debate. The one indicator that the Government frequently refer to is the employment rate. Now, of course it is positive to see an increase in the proportion of people
working, but we must be careful because that has not happened everywhere. For example, IPPR North has shown that there are now 25,000 fewer jobs in the north-east than in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008. We should have had a full recovery, but we have not.

It is deeply complacent of this Government continually to fail to acknowledge the burgeoning proportion of people who are now in insecure work—one in nine working people. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) painted a disturbing picture of the reality of the workings lives of many of his constituents. If we MPs, as a body of people, were in the same position as our constituents, over a quarter of Government Members would not know from one week to the next how many hours they would be likely to work. That may come to pass anyway in the fullness of time but, to be serious, that high rate of insecurity—among one in nine people—is deeply damaging.

The problem has of course been exacerbated by low wages, and here I must point out the Government’s brass neck. They argue that wage growth is at its strongest in 10 years, omitting the fact that this welcome upturn has come after the longest period of wage stagnation since Napoleonic times, all of which—outside the immediate impact of the financial crisis—came on their watch. The increased so-called living wage proposed in this Budget falls short of the £10 an hour that is needed to lift people out of poverty pay.

Finally, as many colleagues have mentioned, the changes to universal credit only repair half the damage done to the system in 2015, and there is nothing in the Budget to repair the damage done to the incomes of disabled people, as was rightly referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha de Cordova). Taken together, insecure work, low wages and cuts to social security have meant that, for the first time in many decades, getting into work no longer means leaving poverty behind. Two thirds of children living in poverty are now in working households.

It is little wonder then that personal debt is rising, as referred to by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who pointed out that current levels of saving are at their lowest for 50 years. While we have seen some change, there has been no adoption of the measures that Labour has advocated to combat out-of-control overdraft fees or credit card debt. It is perhaps no wonder in such circumstances that so many people now feel that the economy is simply no longer working for them, as shown clearly in polling undertaken in September for the IPPR.

The indicators for the future are deeply worrying. Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) rightly quoted extensively from the OBR’s commentary, and I will not repeat her words or the OBR’s at this point. Suffice it to say that surely there is little room for celebration when we learn that GDP growth in future years has had to be revised down, business investment is falling and our levels of productivity growth are so much lower than those in comparable countries.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) clearly set out how different the situation was under Labour, which indicates how short the memories are of some Conservative Members. I respectfully suggest to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) that perhaps he needs to have a word with his former Chancellor, George Osborne, given the latter’s recent comments, as well as with the many economists and international leaders who praised Gordon Brown’s approach to dealing with the financial crisis.

Are the Government finally moving in the right direction to protect our economic future? The evidence of this Budget suggests otherwise. It proposes a temporary increase in the annual investment allowance to £1 million and a new allowance for investment in non-residential structures and buildings but, at the same time, it continues to choke off the nascent onshore wind and energy efficiency industries in this country with its frankly reactionary approach to regulation and support. Appallingly, investment in renewables is going down—it fell by 56% last year—bucking the trend in many comparable countries. My hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) spoke forcefully on that issue, as on others.

We also have worrying falls in investment in the motor industry. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), and I thank him for his pertinent remarks in this debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who made similar points.

Today, as on Monday, we were told that this Government will facilitate a renaissance on our high streets. Well, let us look more closely at the current proposals. The suggested changes to business rates only make good on the damage due to the Government’s botched evaluation back in 2017.

The shadow Minister for industrial strategy, science and innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, rightly made it clear that we desperately need not these temporary measures but a proper root-and-branch review of the business rates system. That is particularly important as a growing number of local authorities are expected to rely solely on council tax and business rates to fund local services. In this debate we have heard about the human impact of the cuts to central funding for local government in both St Helens North and Vale of Clwyd. The impact is very worrying.

When local authorities complain about the situation, the Government tell them, “Well, you can just go and raise council tax.” That position was rightly critiqued by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who also correctly pointed to the Government’s lack of grip on the speculative purchase of so many properties on our high streets by tax haven-based businesses—the Government are doing very little about that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) correctly referred to the need for investment in north Wales, an approach echoed by Yorkshire by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan). They all pointed out the inadequacies of the Government’s current approach.

We need to be clear that this Government have chosen to continue placing the burden of cuts on the worst-off people, and they continue to expect a greater contribution from local council tax payers. It is important to note
that, under this Government, a smaller and smaller proportion of councils are able to provide council tax relief to low-income people. In many of our areas that means that council tax increasingly resembles the cruel poll tax it was meant to replace.

Again in relation to our high streets, this Government’s proposals to promote further the conversion of commercial properties to residential use will starve many growing businesses of the space they need, at the same time as the Government condemn desperate householders to cramped living conditions. How many Members in this Chamber would be willing to live in a flat with a floor surface of 15 square metres? I do not see anyone putting their hand up, but such flats exist in Croydon because of this scheme. It is worth noting that that is half the recommended floor space for housing chimpanzees, and we are talking about people, not animals.

As well as dealing with that problem, we also need action from this Government to protect local amenities such as post offices. On the helpful point my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) made, the Secretary of State needs to be aware that offices closed by the government in 2009 are now being told that they might perhaps be able to have a “little extra” such as a whiteboard or computer for their school, when they are struggling for teachers, for teaching assistants and for basic educational materials. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said, this was an insult.

On productivity, again we did not see the action we need to halt the relative stalling in productivity gains that we have seen in the UK compared with other nations. The £1.6 billion earmarked in the Budget for science and innovation, which the Red Book says was “announced” in this Budget, was nothing of the kind—only £56 million of it is new money. It was not announced in this Budget at all.

Sadly, we have seen minimal action from this Government to deal with the skills shortages in the UK. My hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) both noted eloquently that widespread concerns exists about the plummeting by half in the number of adult learners since 2010 and the fact that further education funding has been slashed by a third. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) also mentioned that issue, perhaps in slightly more explicit language. His anger about it reflects the frustration of many teachers and students in further education. The impact of cuts on young people was also rightly referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and I am grateful to him for his remarks.

During this debate, a number of Conservative Members rightly and properly represented their constituencies by voicing concerns about the lack of extra funding in this Budget for schools’ running costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley suggested that the so-called “little extras” patronisingly provided for in this Budget were like a disappointing Christmas present, but I would go a little further. Where I am from, Santa can be nasty as well as nice; one year my little brother had said the “worst word” one too many times, so on Christmas morning he got a stocking that was filled not with presents, but with straw. I rather suspect that his reaction was similar to that of many teachers and parents on being told that they might perhaps be able to have a “little extra” such as a whiteboard or computer for their school, when they are struggling for teachers, for teaching assistants and for basic educational materials. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said, this was an insult.

On productivity, as on so much else, this was a short-term Budget, rather than the long-term programme we need. The Chancellor this time has benefited from an unexpected windfall due to higher than expected tax receipts and lower than expected Government spending, rather than carefully engineering a successful recovery. There is no guarantee that these conditions will persist. The Chancellor had the chance this year to put public finances on a more sustainable footing, by cancelling his planned cuts to corporation tax and adopting Labour’s more progressive approach to income tax, which would require the top 5% to contribute more, but he chose not to do so.

Again on the subject of revenue raising, this Budget contained a commitment to a new digital services tax. Although it was announced with much fanfare, the devil is in the detail. I will not go into detail now, because I want to hear the Minister’s response, but I would just say that the safe harbour principle within that proposal for a digital services tax and the double threshold rule seem to be subject to exactly the same problems that have beset this Government when they have tried and failed to raise corporation tax from many of these digital giants; this seems to be riddled with loopholes and inadequate. What we really need is a more thorough-going approach, of the type that Labour set out in our tax transparency and enforcement programme.

In conclusion, in his opening remarks the Secretary of State said—I hope I have remembered his words correctly—that he was confident that the life sciences in our country would continue to be strong under “all scenarios” of exit from the EU. That is not what I have heard from biosciences companies, nor from firms in many other sectors. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North spelled out very clearly how a chaotic, no-deal Brexit would cause “economic catastrophe” for areas such as the one he represents, and indeed many others, as was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones).

This week started with the Prime Minister contradicting her Chancellor over whether a no-deal Brexit would require a new economic plan. This week surely has to end with our Government waking up to the reality that they must rule out a no-deal outcome to the Brexit negotiations, and start putting our country and the jobs of our people first.

6.44 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): This Budget demonstrates yet again that careful stewardship of the economy and meeting serious challenges in a serious way, thereby creating an environment for wealth creators to succeed, is always the right course. Now, the hard work of the British people is paying off. We see that in the record numbers in employment, with 3 million more jobs since 2010. We see it in rising real wages, with the fastest rises in real pay among the lowest paid in society. Above all, we see it in our strengthening public finances.

We see in the Budget how a stronger economy enables us to support the NHS, which will require, as the hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Vicky Ford) said, that record-breaking £20.5 billion real-terms per-year increase. Furthermore, a stronger economy has enabled us to cut taxes and to freeze the important duties—whether
on fuel, spirits or beer—so that millions of people throughout the country can enjoy more of the money that they have earned. Those achievements did not fall into the Government’s lap—apologies to the Chief Secretary—they were hard won by the people of this country, and we will not be complacent. This is an optimistic, future-facing Budget, and a Budget for economic growth.

Having listened to much of the past three days of Budget debate, I could summarise the contributions from Opposition Members as wanting more spending and higher taxes. With some notable exceptions, they have had very little to say about how we grow the economy and create wealth. When asked recently, the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), could not name a single businessperson whom he admired. We on the Government Benches understand that behind every business is a story worth knowing—that cafés and gyms and restaurants do not come out of nowhere. We respect and admire these people, and this Budget is for them.

The Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, the retailers, the convenience stores, the pubs, the oil and gas industry that supports so many thousands of jobs in north-east Scotland, and the manufacturing groups such as the EEF all support the Budget. Of course there are challenges. Of course we are in a moment of high uncertainty as we enter a pivotal stage in the Brexit negotiations, but each of those groups—and more—that I have spoken to since the Chancellor sat down believed that we were listening to them and acting. We are delivering for businesses and job creation throughout the country.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) argued at the beginning of the debate, the Budget recognises that the UK has to pay its way in the world. It must be an attractive place for people to invest. To ensure that it is, we have cut corporation tax from 28% to 19%, and receipts have risen by 55%. We have reaffirmed the incentives for entrepreneurs that are attractive for people—including those in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq)—who come here from all over the world. They are attracted here because it is a great place to create businesses, and that is driving the unicorns and tech businesses of this country.

We are extending the start-up loan scheme, and as we have already heard, we have increased the annual investment allowance from £200,000 to £1 million. We have listened to manufacturing businesses, particularly in the midlands and the north, that want to invest in plant, machinery and digital technology. This is about not just the sexy technologies that we heard about earlier but ensuring that manufacturing in this country can continue to thrive.

For working people, we are increasing the national living wage from April and thereby contributing to rising real wages, and we are giving a tax cut to 32 million people throughout the country by increasing the personal allowance and the higher-rate threshold. As we heard at Prime Minister’s questions, it is still unclear whether the Labour party supports that tax cut. The shadow Chancellor reluctantly says he agrees with it, the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), says otherwise, and the Mayor of Greater Manchester says that shadow Chancellor’s views send a shiver down his spine—and that was before Halloween.

We believe that everyone in this country should pay their fair share of tax. There are measures, which we have heard about from right hon. and hon. Members in this Budget debate, to continue to close the tax gap. It is at a near record low, and lower than it was in any year of the previous Labour Government. This Budget does create the world’s first digital services tax.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have had a very good debate this afternoon, and there have been some great contributions from all parts of this House. Members can call me old-fashioned, but I thought that the role of the Minister replying to the debate was to address the issues that have been raised in this debate. He has now been on his feet for nearly six minutes, and apart from some reference to two Conservative Members, he is making just a general speech, which he could have done in an opening speech.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** The Minister has got time to address the issues, and I am sure that that is where he will take us now.

**Robert Jenrick:** That was unfair, because I am addressing the points that have been raised by Members from all parts of the House. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) may not like the answers, but I am providing them. With respect to the digital services tax—it is a tax that has been mentioned by numerous Members across the House—we are the first major country to do this, and it will raise in excess of £1.5 billion, ensuring that, in our thriving economy, our tech-friendly economy, those who generate value from UK users will pay a fair contribution to tax. We look forward to publishing more information and to the consultation on that, which, clearly, hon. Members may wish to take part in.

We chose in this Budget to invest in the long-term economic infrastructure of the country—a subject that has been raised by a number of my colleagues—raising investment levels in this country to the highest sustained level in my lifetime. That is the mark of a mature economy, which is not just spending everything on immediate consumption, but spending money for long-term investment. Public capital investment in this country will be £460 million a week higher under this Government than it was under the previous Labour Government. We have heard some of the ways that we will spend that. We will spend it by increasing investment in our roads—in every type of road. A number of colleagues from across the House—

**Mr Kevan Jones:** Which Members?

**Robert Jenrick:** Well, there was my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for example. She made a representation for the Chelmsford flyover, and we will deliver on that. Let me say one other thing in response to the right hon. Member for North Durham: we listened to those Labour Members who came to see us at the Treasury with genuine representations to grow the economy, but they were few and far between. There was the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for example, and we responded to his requests—[Interruption.]
Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Jones, you are testing my patience. You did say, “Call me old-fashioned”, well, old-fashioned usually has values with it, and you are not showing the best values right now. Come on, Minister.

Robert Jenrick: We are investing in a whole range of different infrastructure projects, which will make a huge difference to the future of this country, from the productivity pinpoints to investing in potholes. We did hear from a number of Members today a slightly snobbish attitude to investing in potholes, but these things matter to ordinary people. They matter to people in my northern constituency of Newark. They matter to people in Walsall, in Halesowen, in Stoke-on-Trent, in Mansfield and in towns that we have heard about here and, in fact, in towns across the whole country, including in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Mr Kevan Jones: Where is it?

Robert Jenrick: In North Durham. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Yes, there you go. Incidentally, the last time that the right hon. Gentleman and I sparred was over clearing up illegal waste sites.

Mr Jones: You have done nothing about that either.

Robert Jenrick: Well, you have not read the Red Book, because we put £10 million—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It might be helpful if you both addressed the House without having a personal debate between the two of you. Come on, Minister.

Robert Jenrick: We have heard in this debate that this is a Budget for high streets and town centres. With great respect, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said that we had borrowed one point of the Labour party’s five-point plan for the high street, and that is true, we did—we are committing to pilot a register of empty shops—but we looked at the other four points in the plan and, frankly, they were thin gruel. We decided that we could do better, and we have.

We are providing a 30% discount to small businesses, affecting 90% of our retailers across the country, and we have created a £675 million future high streets fund—a competitive fund for people across the House and across the country to bid into to secure between £5 million and £25 million to transform their towns. I was surprised that Opposition Members repeatedly criticised the idea of having more homes in town centres, because that is not what the public say. We want vibrant communities in our town centres, and we want to make it cheaper and easier to create shops, workplaces and homes there.

We also heard about great ideas in the Budget. We have to grow the economy in all parts of the country. For example, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) about the special economic area that we are creating in Teesside, working in partnership with the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). That has the potential to transform investment in that area.

Anna Turley: Will the Minister say a little more about what this economic area is? If it is just keeping business rates locally, local authorities will be able to do that next year anyway. Will he indicate a bit more what it will be exactly and what it will mean for the clear-up of the site?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to give the hon. Lady further details. We shall provide business rates retention, and we promised that in the spending review we shall consider whether it is possible to enhance the capital allowances. We have provided £14 million up front to ensure that two plots of land on the site are remediated so that jobs and investment can come in as soon as possible.

We have also announced new university-linked enterprise zones and a competition for more development corporations, starting with one we announced a month ago at Toton in the east midlands. We made an announcement about realising the potential of the Oxford—Cambridge arc of opportunity, with a new expressway and railway linking Oxford and Cambridge, and I am sure that the constitution of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), with whom I have spoken about it on a number of occasions, will benefit.

In Coventry, we will support the automotive sector. We are in regular conversation with JLR about the issues described by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). In the Budget, we announced funding not only for Coventry as city of culture but, at the request of Mayor Andy Street, for a centre for autonomous vehicles in the city, which I hope will build on the great reputation of the automotive sector.

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: With great respect, I shall not give way. I apologise, but there is not enough time now.

The Secretary of State said in his opening remarks that this is a Budget for skills, innovation and progress. We believe that this is an exciting time to be alive. We want to support innovation to drive the economy forward. We are investing £1.6 billion—

Albert Owen: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister said that he was responding to the debate, but three Members from north Wales raised the bid for the north Wales growth deal. The Chancellor only mentioned Wales twice in his Budget, although the Minister said that it was for the whole United Kingdom. Will he address some of the points made by some of the Members from Wales?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can assure you that that is not a point of order, but you have got it on the record.

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman later, but time does not allow now. As he knows, the Budget does commit to a north Wales growth deal. I shall be happy to discuss that further with him.

To conclude, this is a Budget that looks to the future. It is optimistic about our economic potential. It invests in the science and innovation that will drive the economy forward in the years ahead. We have a choice: either we can follow the tired ideas of Opposition Front Benchers, pursuing policies that we know have failed in the past, a ship sailing on yesterday’s wind, or, like Conservative Members, we can look to the future with confidence, and we can champion entrepreneurship, innovation and the wealth creators in society. This is a Budget that
seeks to inspire a new generation to succeed, to excel and to prosper, with policies that will make the economy and the country stronger. I urge Members in all parts of the House to support the Budget in the Lobby tomorrow.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PETITION

Closure of Ward 6, Bishop Auckland General Hospital

6.59 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I should like to present a petition from the people of County Durham to save ward 6 of Bishop Auckland Hospital. Bishop Auckland Hospital is extremely popular with local people, and consequently 14,196 people have signed this petition. It was a surprise when the proposal to close ward 6—a 24-bed ward with 30 nurses working on it—was put forward. No clear justification has yet been made for the closure. If it is because the management believe that care would be better delivered in the community, they should be putting more money into the district nurse team. They are not doing that, which leads us to believe that this is a straightforward funding cut.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of County Durham,

Declares that the government’s policy of underfunding the NHS, our country’s most valued institution, is leading to the closure of Ward 6 of Bishop Auckland General Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Health and Social Care to fund the County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust sufficiently to prevent further closures to services, including those in Ward 6.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Air Pollution: A10 and Broxbourne

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

7.1 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in tonight’s Adjournment debate on air pollution around the A10 and Broxbourne—a matter close to my heart because I happen to live near the A10, in the constituency of Broxbourne, in the borough of Broxbourne. I am never happier than when representing my constituency in the Chamber of the House of Commons. It is why I was elected to serve in this place—to give a voice to my constituents’ concerns on the Floor of this place.

On 5 October, I received a letter by email from the Minister to say that the A10 running through Broxbourne—the spine of Broxbourne—had some of the highest roadside concentrations of nitrogen dioxide in the country. This is a cause of great concern to many. However, I am well aware that the Government will be working closely with Hertfordshire County Council and Broxbourne Borough Council to address the problem. I accept fully the Government’s reassurances that this is a collective priority of both national Government and local government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of air pollution. Air pollution is not a significant issue in only one constituency—it also applies to my own. To address pollution in Northern Ireland, the ecarNI project consists of a consortium of public and private sector organisations working together to bring benefits to our environment, society and economy. I spoke to the hon. Gentleman about this beforehand. Does he agree that more needs to be done to increase both the number of electric cars on our roads and access to charging points through grants and other incentives, thereby reducing air pollution?

Mr Walker: I agree that if we want to promote electric cars, we have to have ease of access to the energy that powers them, so more charging points would seem to be absolutely essential in the drive to get more people transporting themselves around in electric cars. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

On 5 October, I received the letter—the email—from the Minister alerting me to the pollution levels on the A10. I have to say that I am disappointed, not by the conduct of the Minister but the conduct of the Environment Agency in relation to a really important local issue going on in my constituency that has a direct bearing on this pollution.

The background to this is that Veolia has put forward a planning application for a massive 350,000-tonne incinerator in my constituency, which has generated a huge amount of local concern. We have just had a public inquiry, and it is now being considered by the chair of that inquiry. What is deeply irritating is that the public inquiry closed on 2 August—the very same date that I received a letter from the Environment Agency saying that it was minded to grant the permit to the Rye House energy recovery facility on Ratty’s Lane. I am stunned that it chose to write to me to announce that on 2 August, and I am further amazed that originally it
Mr Charles Walker

wanted to close its consultation on 30 August. After interventions from myself and others, the consultation period ran to 24 September.

It simply is not good enough for the Environment Agency to have entirely ignored in its draft determination the major issues relating to nitrogen dioxide on the A10—I am sure that it would have known about that. It is worth drawing the House’s attention to the covering letter of the draft determination, which is extraordinary Whitehall speak. I will take the edited highlights on page 1 and thread them together. The EA starts:

“Unless the document explains otherwise, we have accepted the Applicant’s proposals. The document is in draft at this stage, because we have yet to make a final decision.”

The first sentence says that the EA has accepted the applicant’s proposals, and the sentence after states that the document is in draft because it has yet to make a final decision. However, it goes on to say:

“Our mind remains open at this stage... unless we receive information that leads us to alter the conditions in the draft Permit, or to reject the Application altogether, we will issue the Permit in its current form.”

Then, in a piece of Orwellian double-speak, the EA says:

“In this document we frequently say ‘we have decided’. That gives the impression that our mind is already made up; but as we have explained above, we have not yet done so. The language we use enables this document to become the final decision document in due course with no more re-drafting than is absolutely necessary.”

What a load of phooey and rubbish—I am not sure that “phooey” is a parliamentary word, but once it is in Hansard, perhaps it will become so.

It is impossible to imagine that the EA was not aware of the information about nitrogen dioxide on the A10 when looking at the draft permit. As I said, there is a planning application before the planning inspector for a 350,000-tonne incinerator in my constituency. Of course, it would be entirely legitimate for Members to say, “Well, Mr Walker, you’re just a nimby, aren’t you?” But unlike on most occasions when someone is accused of being a nimby, I can come up with a good defence. The proposed site for the 350,000-tonne incinerator already has a 750 MW power station next to it—that is a lot of megawatts—as well as a 90,000-tonne refuse-derived fuel plant and a 66,000-tonne anaerobic digester. We are doing our bit for Hertfordshire.

On top of that, if the 350,000-tonne incinerator goes ahead, a further 97,820 HGV movements from diesel lorries will be generated in my constituency up the A10. My voice is rising because that is not good enough. Another 97,820 HGV movements up the A10 and down the link road where, at a measuring station, nitrogen dioxide levels are already 35% above acceptable air quality standards, is not acceptable. Another 98,000 lorries is not compatible with any pledge that I or my council has been given about taking seriously the business of this pollution on the A10.

I am aware that some of the proponents of this power station have been touring various party political conferences—perhaps those populated by Conservative Members—but not me—saying, “Does that Charles Walker wield undue influence?” Do I wield undue influence on behalf of my constituents? Mr Deputy Speaker, I say to you that the only influence I wield is the voice that I bring to this place—the Chamber of the House of Commons. When Broxbourne is doing its bit on power generation and on recycling, and is paying the cost of that right now—air pollution up the A10 is at some of the highest levels in the country—it is a pretty rum deal that we are being asked to do even more and to bear even more of this burden. It is not credible that the Environment Agency did not factor this into its decision making on the draft permit.

I am not known for going on at great length in this place, and I feel that if I was to add further to my speech, I would be going over old ground. I will just conclude with a quote from the Royal College of Physicians. It has written to me about tonight’s Adjournment debate, so concerned is it for my constituents. It states:

“The negative health impacts of air pollution can and must be mitigated. Closer working between different government departments to deliver strict enforcement of air quality limits, and transition to clean fuels and renewable energy sources will go some way to reducing our exposure to air pollution.”

I want to start seeing such joined-up thinking, and my constituents want to experience that joined-up thinking, because right now they are feeling extremely let down and, dare I say it, extremely vulnerable to events over which they do not seem to have any control. As I say, the public planning inquiry for this incinerator ended on 2 August, which was too late—I repeat, too late—for the new evidence, which I have presented on the Floor of the House today, to be inserted as part of my constituents’ representations, and that is a pretty poor show.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on securing this important debate, as well as on bringing to the attention of the House the specific challenges we face on the stretch of the A10 in the Broxbourne constituency, the wider importance of tackling poor air quality and, indeed, the impact of the potential incinerator.

I understand that my hon. Friend is particularly concerned about the impact of the proposed plant, and about the possible increase in the number of HGV movements further worsening the air quality. He will be aware that the application has been called in by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for his own determination. It would not be appropriate for me to make direct comment on the application, as the final decision now lies with the Secretary of State. I am absolutely convinced that he will take into consideration all the relevant information regarding the application.

It is fair to say that the Environment Agency is an independent regulator, so I do not have any control over how it considers approving permits. I share my hon. Friend’s frustration about the legalese that is often in such documents, but we have to recognise that this is a quasi-judicial process. My general expectation is that the Environment Agency would consider the impact of the proposed development itself, rather than its location. However, the formal planning process should consider the location, including the travel routes and the impact it may have on the environment, including the air quality, in determining whether the development should go ahead.
However, as I said, this is now in the hands of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

My hon. Friend mentioned the point raised by the Royal College of Physicians; I am glad that it has shown an interest in this debate. It is important that I should start by providing some context. Overall, air quality has been improving in this country, but we are still falling short on a specific element of air pollution: roadside concentrations of nitrogen dioxide.

We are not alone in that across the European Union. Current air quality problems, particularly on NO₂, are in large part caused by the EU’s failed regime for vehicle emissions testing: cars were deemed to have passed the test of operation within NO₂ limits, when, for several manufacturers, that was far from the truth. Eighteen other EU member states, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, are also breaching air pollution limits as a result of that failed testing regime.

A former UK Government took the decision to encourage diesel vehicles, to tackle the challenge of climate change and reduce carbon. Although we may have benefited in that regard, we are now absolutely suffering given the impact on air quality. The combined effect of those two factors means that we are having to go much further than was anticipated on tackling the NO₂ air quality challenge when the UK signed up to the targets, prior to 2010.

Air pollution has reduced significantly since 2010—emissions of nitrogen oxides have fallen by almost 27% and are at their lowest level since records began. But there is clearly more to do. That is why the Government have committed £3.5 billion to transport and improved air quality, including £1.5 billion support for electric vehicles, £1.2 billion for cycling and walking, and £475 million specifically in support of the activity resulting from the EU’s failed regime for vehicle emissions testing: cars were deemed to have passed the test of operation within NO₂ limits, when, for several manufacturers, that was far from the truth. Eighteen other EU member states, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, are also breaching air pollution limits as a result of that failed testing regime.

Tonight, my hon. Friend has raised the A10 in his constituency of Broxbourne—specifically, the stretch of the A10 between the B198 and the slip road to the A1170, near the retail park in Cheshunt. The A10 road link was initially identified as moderately exceeding nitrogen dioxide limits, according to the central national model used by the Government for reporting compliance to the European Commission, in line with the ambient air quality directive requirements. I contacted Broxbourne Borough Council about this matter and I am pleased to say that an air quality management area for part of the A10 has already been established.

As the House will be aware, the High Court required the Government to take a more direct legal approach with those local authorities responsible for roads such as this, which our projections indicated would become compliant with legal limits within the next few years. To that effect, I issued ministerial directions and offered support to 33 local authorities to take more detailed study and action. As part of that work, Broxbourne has carried out a detailed study of the A10 road link in question, using local modelling data, which gives a much more granular, representative picture of air quality on that road. The study was submitted to the Government on 31 July this year, as required by the ministerial direction.

Some variance between the national model and the output of a local study is to be expected. That reflects the level of detail that can be modelled at a national level. It is also important to add that the latest 2017 reporting data suggests that our previous projections were overall more pessimistic than other projections, and that nitrogen dioxide levels at a national level have fallen faster than expected.

However, the Broxbourne study clearly identified a much more significant problem than the national model, projecting that this stretch of road will see emissions that exceed the legal limit until 2028 if no further action is taken. That is clearly unacceptable. Now that both the council and the Government have a greater understanding of the problem, our priority is to work with Broxbourne Borough Council to find a means of addressing this as quickly as possible.

I recognise that this is a stretch of road that presents a number of challenges due to the sheer amount of traffic using the route into and out of London and on to the M25, as well as the numerous junctions in the area and the importance of the route in relation to key international transport hubs.

Earlier this month, I issued Broxbourne Borough Council with a further ministerial direction requiring it to carry out a more detailed study to identify the most suitable measures to address the exceedance in the shortest time possible. The deadlines for that work include an initial plan by 31 January 2019 and a final plan by 31 October 2019, and sooner where possible. That is a challenging deadline, in particular as the work includes more detailed local transport and air quality modelling to really understand what is happening in the local area and understand what solutions can be found to reduce nitrogen dioxide levels on this specific stretch of road. We can then provide Broxbourne with the funding to implement the solutions.

There is joint working: I am pleased to say that the Department for Transport and my Department have established a joint air quality unit, with officials from...
the two Departments working together. They have already provided detailed guidance and will be supporting local councils as they develop this work. The unit is already working closely with Broxbourne, having held a workshop last week to explain the process over the next 12 months and the support we will be offering. We will shortly be providing a further £100,000 of funding to get this process under way. The council is now actively considering what measures could bring forward compliance with legal limits as soon as possible, which could include a charging clean air zone.

We will also continue to work closely with other parties responsible for roads that interact with the A10 and which may also be able to take action that could have an impact on this link. As I have said, the M25 is a major source of traffic on and off the A10, so we will ensure that Highways England is engaging with Broxbourne to understand these actions and to identify what complementary actions can be taken to drive improvements.

I will also continue to press the Mayor of London on the need to take robust action to address very high emissions in the capital. Specifically, we will need to understand what the impacts will be on the traffic coming into and out of London on the A10 as a result of the tightening of the standards for the London-wide low emission zone for HGVs.

Mr Charles Walker: I know the Minister will not be able to comment on this, but may I just restate any constituents’ irritation that despite all these words of concern a planning application for a 350,000-tonne incinerator that will pump further nitrogen dioxide into the Broxbourne-Lee valley and generate another 97,820 lorry movements is not compatible with the desire to reduce nitrogen dioxide levels?

Dr Coffey: I understand that. Broxbourne has come to the attention of the Government via national modelling and local modelling specifically because of nitrogen dioxide emissions on that stretch of road. That is why the Government are working directly with Broxbourne. I have already indicated to my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will be making the determination. I fully expect that the location and the travel routes that are being proposed would be part of his consideration.

I pay tribute to Broxbourne Borough Council, as I believe it has embraced this important situation with a positive attitude. It appears to recognise that what may appear to be politically difficult decisions on tackling air quality still have to be taken in a timely manner to proactively improve air quality. Frankly, I wish more councils would act in such a proactive manner. I have already suggested to my hon. Friend that I cannot comment directly on the application. I have to leave it at the comments that I have made twice to the House now on the process and next steps.

I also commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his commitment to the issue. He talked about the importance of improving air quality across the United Kingdom. He will be aware that how this gets tackled is a devolved matter, but I am sure that he will support the positive action that is being taken to increase the opportunities for electric charging and similar. He and I were together at the bike ride for the purse appeal—[Interruption]—indeed, you took part, too, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to say that he and I managed to achieve the same distance on the electric bike and that we were not the slowest—but nor were we the fastest.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne is keen to see quick progress. I am conscious of the decision that he wants the Secretary of State to make on this matter, but I stress to the House that it is important that we work together on the impacts of air pollution. I am conscious of what he said about lorry movements today.

I thought it might be worth adding that, although we have largely been talking about the impact of NO2 emissions, the other challenge that people are increasingly becoming aware of—I expect that the Royal College of Physicians is increasingly pressing the case on this—is tackling the issue of particulate matter. This tends to be soot and dust—that is largely the way of describing it—and the width of a human hair is 10 times more than the size of one of these elements of particulate matter. That gives hon. Members an indication of how tiny these elements are.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow, the World Health Organisation is holding its first ever global conference on the impact of air pollution on human health. I am conscious that my hon. Friend is very concerned about the impact on the health of his residents, particularly along the A10. I am really pleased that this issue is gaining traction. One challenge of NO2 emissions—I point out that we are absolutely compliant with the law on particulate matter emissions—is that NO2 particularly affects those who are already vulnerable to poor health, whether they are little children, people with asthma or elderly people. The challenge of particulate matter is that it pretty much has an impact on everybody. It is one of those things—it can simply get through our internal systems and cause difficulties when we breathe in. The Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants has re-released figures that suggest that the deaths of fewer than 40,000 people can be attributed to the impact of air pollution, but that is still 40,000 people too many.

This is a challenge that we face as a country. We have been praised by the WHO on what we are trying to do about particulate matter. It is why there has been a call for evidence, which has closed, on particulate matter coming from tyres and brakes—I am conscious that that may well be a consideration in terms of the HGVs, as well as other vehicles, along the A10. We have also undertaken a consultation on the impact of domestic burning, which accounts for about 40% of the particulate matter generated in this country.

The Government are taking a holistic approach to how we tackle climate change and air quality. It is important that the two go together. We need to put more focus on the actions that each of us can take to improve air quality in our homes and communities, and I assure the House that the Government are treating this as very important indeed. Our intention is to continue to improve air quality for all the associated public health benefits. We are taking action alongside Broxbourne Borough Council and across the country to realise this
vision. I thank my hon. Friend again for affording me the opportunity to respond to his concerns in this debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.29 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tourism

1. Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What steps is he taking to support tourism throughout the UK?

2. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps is he taking to support tourism throughout the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Tourism is hugely important for the UK. One of my major focuses is to encourage visitors from across the world to visit the whole of the United Kingdom. We provide financial support through both VisitBritain and VisitEngland, which are responsible for promoting the UK through a range of initiatives and campaigns.

Kirstene Hair: One of the many reasons why millions of people from around the world come to the UK and Scotland is because of our world-class food and drink sector, of which Angus is a powerhouse—the Minister is very welcome to come and taste our Forfar bridie whenever he wishes. Can he reassure me that the UK Government is working to support the Scottish food and drink industry, and to develop the necessary links between that sector and the UK tourism industry?

Michael Ellis: I thank my hon. Friend for that question because we are working hard to promote and support some of our world-leading produce, and she is doing a wonderful job in her Angus constituency with regard to tourism as well as many other areas. I am sure that she will join me in welcoming the Chancellor’s Budget because the support it shows to the whisky industry by freezing duty clearly helps. Food and drink is particularly important. I attended a board meeting yesterday of the GREAT campaign, which covers Scotland, and I am disappointed that the Scottish Government have not been as supportive of that campaign as my hon. Friend.

Robert Courts: West Oxfordshire has many famous tourist attractions that bring economic benefits to the surrounding areas, including Blenheim Palace, which attracts almost 1 million visitors annually. What are the Government doing to ensure that lesser-known tourist attractions such as Kelmscott Manor, Crocodiles of the World and Cotswold Wildlife Park have their fair share of the tourism cake to bring in all those benefits?

Michael Ellis: As you know, Mr Speaker, West Oxfordshire is a beautiful part of the country and we are supporting it in a number of ways. VisitBritain has organised travel trade trips to West Oxfordshire, including to Blenheim Palace. My officials at the Department also work closely with Experience Oxfordshire, a good organisation that makes sure that as many visitors as possible come to that part of the UK.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): With the building of the new £83 million international convention centre at Celtic Manor, there is huge potential for Newport. What are Ministers doing with the Wales Office to encourage more events and conferences in Newport, the home of the NATO summit in 2014?

Michael Ellis: I commend the hon. Lady for her support for that conference facility. Conferences, business events and events of all types are very important to the economy of this country. We engage with the Wales Office, as indeed we do with the Scottish Government, to support business events.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is nice to have the festival for Great Britain and Northern Ireland that is due to take place in 2022. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that Northern Ireland does not get left behind and has the same opportunities as our GB counterparts to show off our business, technology, culture, sport and arts expertise to the rest of the world?

Michael Ellis: Northern Ireland will certainly not be left behind. I was delighted to visit Belfast only a few weeks ago, when I saw its wonderful tourism offer, including the Titanic exhibition and so much else. I would recommend visiting Northern Ireland to anyone, as there are wonderful tourism opportunities—“Game of Thrones” is filmed there, and there is so much else.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Steve Ridgway of VisitBritain, along with Anthony Pickles, together with airlines, hotels and all the rest of it, have pulled together a sector deal. I do not want to bore the House because I have raised this before, but when are the Government going to support it?

Michael Ellis: My Department is working very hard on that matter. We have been pursuing it and we continue to do so.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Tourism should not just be beaches and city breaks. The wonders of Ealing include our world famous studios of Ealing comedy and Downton fame, the basement blues club where the Stones first played, and the Questors theatre, the biggest am-dram venue in the world. They should all be linked together in a cultural quarter, but our council is cash-strapped in its provision of even the most basic services. The Minister mentioned the effect of Brexit on the number of overseas visitors. [Interruption.] So my question is—[Interruption. I was building up to
the question, Mr Speaker; thank you for reminding me. What are the Government doing to put suburbs on the tourist trail?

Michael Ellis: We want to support tourism around the country, and of course that includes Ealing. The hon. Lady mentioned Ealing Studios and the Ealing comedies—I think I have a box set actually—and the reality is that VisitBritain and VisitEngland support lots of programmes around the country. [Interruption.]

Some of the comedians are on the Opposition Benches at the moment.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The biggest concern for the tourist industry at the moment is access to labour once we end the free movement of people. Will the Minister join my calls for the Government to introduce a seasonal migrant workers scheme for the tourism and hospitality sector?

Michael Ellis: We are in close discussions with our colleagues in the Home Office about that, and my hon. Friend can be assured, as can the whole House, that I am representing the tourism sector and all its interests.

Secondary Ticketing Websites

3. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with internet service providers on the occurrence of secondary ticketing websites in search rankings. [907396] The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I take this issue very seriously, and I know that the hon. Lady has done fantastic work on it over the years. Ticketing website advertisements must comply with the Advertising Standards Authority code, and those using advertising facilities attached to search engines must also comply with their terms of service to prevent misleading ads and to protect consumers. I am in touch with internet service providers, and they assure me that they are prepared to take action where necessary.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the Minister for her work on this issue and her support for my work on it. According to research by the FunFair Alliance in a study carried out earlier this year, Viagogo was in the top two results on Google in 80 out of 100 searches. Time and again, victims of Viagogo tell me that they have been directed to Viagogo by a Google search. Does the Minister think it is appropriate that Viagogo is still able to buy itself to the top of the Google search rankings while it is facing court action by the Competition and Markets Authority?

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Viagogo is subject to legal action by the CMA. However, she might be interested to know that the Advertising Standards Authority has ruled that consumers would not assume that Viagogo was the primary ticketing agent for an event, and that there was therefore nothing in the ad to claim that it was the primary—[Interruption.]

If you will permit me, Mr Speaker, I will just say that Google’s conditions state that resellers must prominently disclose themselves as resellers. The hon. Lady can therefore draw her own conclusions from that—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but there is great pressure on time today because the House has decreed a 10 o’clock finish for substantive questions, so shorter questions and shorter answers are needed.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Minister accept, however, that Google is accepting ads through Viagogo agents that are in breach of consumer protection law and of Google’s own terms of service, and that it is effectively taking money through being party to a fraud by allowing those ads to run?

Margot James: I absolutely sympathise with my hon. Friend’s point of view. I have had discussions with Google on this very point. I think it is safe to say that we have a difference of view, but I remain optimistic that the search engines will comply with their own terms and conditions in the end.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is also important to focus on the supply of tickets, and that we must ask artists and promoters to ensure that they work with venues to restrict the supply of tickets to sites such as Viagogo?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have taken a lot of action that is resulting in an improvement in the situation and a reduction in the availability of tickets on these very questionable sites.

Mr Speaker: I call Mary Robinson. Not here. I call Andrew Rosindell. Not here. What is going on? Where are our colleagues? I hope that they are well and that they will be back. I call Jack Brereton.

Creative Industries

6. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the creative industries throughout the UK. [907400] The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The creative industries are a great British success story. They generate £91.8 billion for our economy and are responsible for 2 million jobs, so we are committed to supporting all creative businesses. The sector deal that was published earlier this year contains £150 million of private and public sector funding to realise the potential of this great sector.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she join me in wishing the ceramics industry every success in its cultural development fund bid to establish an international ceramics centre in Stoke-on-Trent?

Margot James: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in wishing the consortium all the very best with its application. The ceramics sector in and around Stoke has been revitalised in recent years. As well as being important in its own right, it is important to many other industries. We have had some excellent bids for the £20 million cultural development fund, and decisions on the projects to be funded are expected early next year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What a good day it is: we have got Channel 4 for Leeds. Applause?
Will the Minister look carefully at the campaign that we are running to get more people who are on the autistic spectrum into the creative industries? Quirky people are very creative; let us do more work to get them into those industries.

Margot James: I congratulate Leeds on its success in securing Channel 4’s new head office. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We are already working with the National Autistic Society on a programme to engage young people in coding, which will help them in the creative sector, but more can be done, and I will take his suggestion on board.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): In the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), I cannot ask the Minister about the Health and Social Care Secretary’s important speech next week about the arts and health. Instead, may I ask whether she, like me, welcomes the astonishing figures that continue to come from the British film industry thanks to the success of the film tax credit? The industry continues to make a huge contribution to our economy.

Margot James: I heartily agree with my right hon. Friend. London Film Week marked the launch of the British Film Institute’s excellent report on the massive value of film tax credits to the economy. A third of all global blockbuster films are made in this country, which is a fantastic success story.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister will also want to congratulate Glasgow on getting Channel 4’s creative hub, which is the culmination of a great campaign led by Stuart Cosgrove, and the council team of Susan Aitken, David McDonald and Colin Edgar. Will the Minister come to Glasgow to see all the brilliant things that the city can offer the creative industries?

Margot James: I totally agree with the hon. Lady that the news is a great success for Glasgow, and I am pleased that Channel 4 made that decision, given the huge talent and creativity in the city. I shall be glad to visit next year to see the progress with my own eyes.

**Grassroots Football**

7. Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the implications for grassroots football of the failure of the proposed sale of Wembley stadium.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I should say at the outset—

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Where’s Tracey then? Where is the Sport Minister?

Jeremy Wright: I am about to explain. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has been visiting the United States this week for meetings, including a White House roundtable on doping in sport, and she is travelling back this morning.

I can tell the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby) that, over the next four years, almost £100 million of public money will help to build and upgrade artificial and grass pitches, encourage greater participation and enhance coaching programmes. He will also be aware that football is benefiting from £100 million a year up to 2019 from the Premier League, and I have begun discussions about ensuring that investment remains at least at that level for the next three years.

Sir David Crausby: Football’s coffers are overflowing, except of course when it comes to grassroots football. The Football Association reports that one in six matches is postponed and one in three pitches is inadequate. In fairness, more money is coming in from the professional game following Government pressure, but it is nowhere near enough, and we still have only half as many 3G pitches as Germany. If we are to remain even close to the forefront of the game, we need to do much more for children’s football—

Mr Speaker: Order. We just need a question. That was far too long. We need a question with a question mark. Thank you.

Sir David Crausby: Will the Secretary of State put even more pressure on the Premier League to dig deep in its pockets?

Jeremy Wright: Yes.

15. [907410] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): At 3 o’clock on Saturday, Sporting Khalsa will be taking on the mighty Hucknall Town in Willenhall. What else can the Secretary of State do to support such grassroots football in my constituency?

Jeremy Wright: I am not available for selection, but there is a huge amount to be done to encourage people to participate. We have talked about facilities, but this is also about people: those who play, those who coach and those who encourage. We need to do more on all those things.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Grassroots football and football in general, will be improved by greater financial transparency, so what are the Government doing to ensure that club owners cannot sell part of a club’s assets without clearly reporting it?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Lady will know, rules already exist around the handling of money in relation to criminal activity, and it is important that we have as much transparency as possible. I will consider her specific point and, if she will forgive me, get back to her on it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What has been the impact of the reduced rent to small clubs arising from revisions to the electronic communications code? That did not happen on the Secretary of State’s watch, and it was not intended, but it has been a disaster, has it not?

Jeremy Wright: I cannot agree with my right hon. Friend. With the electronic communications code, we have attempted to ensure that property owners cannot prevent the roll-out of new infrastructure that is needed to ensure that this country has proper coverage for mobile and broadband, and that will have to continue. We of course want to ensure that people are properly remunerated, but they cannot hold the whole process to ransom.
Digital Radio Multiplex Services

8. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What progress his Department has made on supporting the development of small-scale digital radio multiplex services. [907402]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I recognise the important role that commercial and community radio stations play in the communities they serve, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on the passage of his Broadcasting (Multiplex Services) Act 2017. My Department provided funding for the successful trials of small-scale digital audio broadcasting across the UK, and we have now completed the consultation on detailed proposals for the licensing framework.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome removing barriers to smaller community and commercial radio stations going digital, but can she advise on when she expects the new licensing system for small-scale multiplexes to be fully in place?

Margot James: Having completed the consultation on the new licensing system, we are now working closely with Ofcom on the detailed arrangements, including spectrum planning, on which Ofcom has the lead. Our aim is to bring forward the secondary legislation required for the first stages next year.

Digital Sector: Economic Contribution

9. Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the contribution of the digital sector to the UK economy. [907403]

11. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the contribution of the digital sector to the UK economy. [907405]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK’s digital sector is a global powerhouse, and the most recent official statistics show that the sector has contributed over £116 billion to the UK economy and is growing faster than the average for the rest of the economy by two and a half times. From 2015 to 2016, the digital sector’s contribution increased by 5.8%.

Leo Docherty: Does the Minister agree that the remarkable growth of UK digital companies—UKCloud in Farnborough in my constituency was the fastest growing tech company in the UK last year—shows that the digital sector is in rude health?

Margot James: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I visited UKCloud a few months ago and was extremely impressed by not just its fast growth but its innovation. The UK cloud sector is a strongly performing part of the overall digital sector. Earlier this year I spoke at the UK cloud awards and was very impressed by the success, innovation and growth potential of the cloud sector.

Alan Mak: Govtech is a growing part of the digital economy and it can help to boost public sector productivity. What steps can the Department take to help entrepreneurs and start-ups in this important tech sector?

Margot James: My hon. Friend puts his finger on an area of tech that will transform our country once it is unleashed through public services. We want to make it easier for Departments and public bodies to work with tech companies, including small and medium-sized enterprises. The Chancellor has announced that we will conduct an artificial intelligence review to examine how Government can make better use of AI to provide valuable services more efficiently.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Ninety-five per cent. of respondents to my broadband survey are not happy with their service, which is not surprising, given that Barnsley’s broadband speeds are 20% slower than the national average. What are the Government doing to invest in broadband in the north?

Margot James: We are doing a huge amount through commercial operations, and the hon. Lady will find that things improve dramatically. Her constituency is only a few steps off the 95% average for access to superfast broadband. I advise her to make sure that people know that they have it. Approximately half the people who have access to superfast broadband do not take it up, because some of them do not realise it is there.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As well as fast broadband, small tech businesses in my constituency and across the country need the right people to make sure that they grow and continue contributing to the economy. What conversations is the Minister having with the Home Office about the negative impacts of the Government’s immigration policy on attracting and securing the right staff to grow these businesses?

Margot James: The hon. Lady will know that we have doubled the number of tier 1 exceptional talent visas to 2,000. We have also announced a start-up visa for entrepreneurs. The other side of the coin, of course, is the huge investment we are making in skills training for people who are already resident in her constituency.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What discussions has the Department had with the Cabinet Office about supporting tech start-ups with local and national Government procurement?

Margot James: We have a fantastic organisation, Tech Nation, with which we work closely to build the hubs around the country that directly support SMEs; the British Business Bank also does this and it is now starting a regional network of advisers for SMEs in tech.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The tech sector is important, but it is not yet a big enough contributor to the Treasury. Can the Minister tell us what percentage of sales will be paid in the new tax introduced by the Chancellor by the big five tech giants next year?

Margot James: My understanding of what the Chancellor announced in the Budget on Monday is that he will be introducing a digital sales tax approximating to 2% of digital turnover. I think the right hon. Gentleman can make his own calculations.
Hard with those who are interested in attracting them to some of these major events, and the Government work but she is right to say that legacy is important, too. Exchequer funding that will go to support event delivery, the hon. Lady will welcome the up to £15 million of events?

Will my right hon. and learned Friend tell the House north?

will have a lasting impact on communities across the legacy programme that has been put together, which will deliver to the north of England and recognise the rugby league world cup, will the Minister welcome the economic impact for local host communities.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman: the Olympic legacy is a very good example of what can be achieved. He will recognise that the initial decision to be taken is one for the Football Association. It must decide whether it wishes to bid, but if it does, he has my assurance that the Government will be fully behind it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Should Premier League clubs in the northern powerhouse area and elsewhere not pay a lot more for their policing costs?

Of course they already do, through tax and through other measures where they do assist, but we will continue to talk to the Premier League about ways in which they can help. We have talked already today about their support for grassroots football and I am sure there are other ways in which they can assist, too.

Leaving the EU: Data Transfers

12. Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on securing an adequacy decision from the EU to ensure uninterrupted UK-EU data transfers after the UK leaves the EU.

The United Kingdom has made it clear that we are ready to begin discussions on an adequacy assessment. The Commission has not yet indicated a timetable for such an assessment. Ministers and officials from DCMS and other Departments have visited member states and EU institutions to deliver the Government’s message on the importance of that decision to the UK and to the EU, and on the need to start now, and we will continue to do this.

Bill Esterson: Data adequacy is vital to financial services. TheCityUK tells us that what has been suggested so far does not provide a long-term, sustainable solution. Now that Government sources are distancing themselves from their own overnight reports of an adequacy deal, will the Secretary of State stop the spin and tell us what the Government are going to do and when they are going to reach the agreement on data that is so vital to our financial services?

Jeremy Wright: There is no spin here. One of two things will be true: either we will reach a deal with the EU, in which case I expect data to be part of that deal; or we will not, in which case we will seek an adequacy decision. It is very much in the interests of both sides—EU and UK—for these arrangements to be made.
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is it not abundantly clear that an agreement is just as important to the EU as it is to us, so it will happen either way?

Jeremy Wright: I think that is highly likely.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We are blessed in this country to have—

Mr Speaker: No, no: Question 13.

Toby Perkins: Good point.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is about tennis.

Mr Speaker: It is okay; the hon. Gentleman will get his second serve in a moment.

Tennis

13. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the correlation between the number of professional tennis tournaments played in the UK and the level of domestic participation in that sport. [907408]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Mr Speaker, I know that you would not want to miss out on any information about tennis. The Lawn Tennis Association continually reviews the number of professional events held in this country with the international tennis associations. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Britain has the world’s greatest tournament, Wimbledon, and also hosts the Association of Tennis Professionals world tour finals, which will celebrate its 10th year being held at the O2 later this month. We continue to encourage participation in tennis, with more than £9 million given to the LTA between 2017 and 2021 to encourage more participation.

Toby Perkins: As I was saying, the Secretary of State is absolutely right to talk about our world-class tournaments, but at challenger and future levels, we have far fewer tournaments than the other major European nations. Holding tournaments right across the UK is an important part of the participation strategy, so what more can the Secretary of State tell us about what he is saying to the LTA about getting tournaments held throughout the country at that lower level?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that is important. The other important thing he will recognise is the development of the talent pipeline to give young players the opportunity to play in more and more tournaments. I should have made it clear that part of the £9 million I referred to in my previous answer is for the development of the talent pipeline. I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says and we will do anything more that we can.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating England Hockey on the successful hosting of the women’s world cup this summer? Does he support the Hockey Futures programme, which was launched off the back of that tournament to encourage more young people from all walks of life to get the health and social benefits of playing hockey?

Jeremy Wright: Before anyone notices—

Mr Speaker: That question was entirely disorderly.

Ben Bradley: It was in the UK.

Mr Speaker: Yes, the question was about the UK, but the main question was about professional tennis tournaments, not random activities in the UK. Nevertheless, although entirely disorderly, the hon. Gentleman’s question was quite fun, so let us hear the answer.

Jeremy Wright: Before you noticed that, Mr Speaker, I was simply going to say yes.

Mr Speaker: That is even better.

14. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle loneliness. [907409]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government recently published their first ever strategy for tackling loneliness in England. Commitments include a national loneliness campaign, investment in community spaces and local data pilots, and embedding loneliness in our internet safety White Paper and digital inclusion fund. Those commitments are in addition to the £20.5 million of new grant funding for projects to prevent loneliness that was announced by the Government in June.

Mike Wood: Is the Secretary of State aware of the research published by the University of Oxford’s Robin Dunbar, which found that people who have a local pub that they visit regularly tend to be more socially engaged and to have better mental health? Will he join me in welcoming the measures announced by the Chancellor to support pubs and brewing, which will help to tackle loneliness and isolation?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for local pubs is legendary and he has managed to express it again here. He is right that pubs and other community institutions have a huge part to play in dealing with loneliness in our society across a range of many other measures that we need to take.
Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What significance does the Secretary of State place on the role of the voluntary sector in helping to tackle loneliness in our country? If, like me, he thinks that it is an important role, will he say what discussions he has had with the Department of Health and Social Care and with local government to make sure that commissioners of services now understand that the voluntary sector should be taken seriously?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He may know that part of the responsibilities of Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will now include attention to issues of loneliness and he will see that, when we announce those who are the recipients of the £20.5 million that I mentioned a moment or so ago, there are a range of different organisations across the country, all of which play a vital part in this and to which we should all be grateful.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907411] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I am sure that the House will join me in offering heartfelt condolences to all those impacted by the tragedy in Leicester last weekend. Football clubs are at the heart of our communities and, just as Leicester’s magical premier league win inspired the city, this tragic loss of life will be deeply felt. My thoughts and sympathies, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with the friends and families of all those who lost their lives, with everyone at the club and with the people of Leicester.

Bill Esterson: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s remarks about Leicester City?

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders affect thousands of children born every year, and that includes entirely preventable permanent brain damage. Will he include alcohol advertising in the 9 pm watershed consultation on the advertising of unhealthy food?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have not yet given the details of that consultation process, but it is important that we address harms such as the one he mentions in a variety of different ways. If that is not the right way to do it, we will certainly consider what may be, and I am grateful to him for raising it today.

T2. [907412] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the UK’s ability to support any bright new businesses starting up in our regional towns, particularly start-up tech businesses, and to help them grow?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We do indeed have many bright new businesses across the UK. Research published a week ago by Tech Nation showed that British cities such as Manchester and Cambridge have the same number of tech companies now valued at $100 million, and that, I think, shows that we as a nation are really supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in their growth aspirations.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is disappointing that the Minister who led the review that concluded that high-stakes fixed odds betting terminals were a social blight is not here with us this morning, although, contrary to what the Secretary of State said, I understand that Patrick Kidd of The Times is reporting that she is actually with the Chief Whip at the moment, and not in transit, as he hinted. May I ask him whether when he hinted to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that he was minded to delay the reduction in stakes on fixed odds betting terminals he had actually read the 78 pages of the devastating report, which his ministerial colleague had dedicated three years to compiling?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport and Civil Society was travelling back this morning, and it seemed unwise to rely on public transport or London traffic to ensure her being here, so we made arrangements for me to answer questions. I apologise, Mr Speaker, if the hon. Gentleman objects to my answering questions that are targeted at me, as you announced at the beginning of the session. On the issue that he raises, there has never been an announcement of the time at which this change to fixed odds betting terminals’ stakes would come in. There were early-day motions and all-party parliamentary group reports urging the Government to bring this forward from April 2020 and we have done exactly that. He will know that, in a few moments’ time, there will be an opportunity to discuss this subject in more detail and I will happily set out the rationale for this choice.

Kevin Brennan: The Secretary of State did not answer the question, nor did he confirm that the Minister for Sport and Civil Society is actually in the building. The announcement in the Budget of the delay in implementing the stake reduction was a betrayal of his ministerial colleague and his two predecessors as Secretary of State, as well as the victims and their families, whose lives have been blighted by gambling addiction. Why has he chosen to back the bookies rather than the gambling addiction victims and their families, his own Minister and the overwhelming public interest?

Jeremy Wright: No, there has been no delay. Mr Speaker, I am in your hands: I am very happy to set out today the detailed explanation of why we have done what we have done. The shadow Secretary of State has asked for an urgent question on this very subject at half-past 10, which you have granted, so it is a matter for you as to whether you would like me to address the question now or at 10.30 am.

Mr Speaker: The answer is very simple. The normal rules apply at Question Time—topical questions and answers are brief. The Secretary of State has perfectly properly given an answer. As he says, there will be an urgent question today; the matter can and will be explored further then.

T3. [907414] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I will try to be brief, Mr Speaker. The all-party parliamentary group for rural business recently recommended mobile
data roaming for areas that are quite isolated, such as my constituency of North Cornwall. The group reckons that this could boost mobile data by 8%. Will the Government apply pressure in this regard to ensure that my constituents get the best coverage?

**Margot James:** I hearthly agree with my hon. Friend’s concerns. I was delighted that the Budget confirmed that there is now £200 million to kick-start connectivity for superfast broadband around the edge of the country, and the Red Book shows that one of the places that this process will start is in my hon. Friend’s county of Cornwall.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) in welcoming Channel 4’s hub, which is great news for Glasgow and the Scottish screen sector?

**Jeremy Wright:** There has been no delay, but the hon. Lady is right that a large part of the rationale for this decision was to protect exactly the people she refers to. This Government have made that substantive change, and it should be recognised that there are a number of factors in the process of determining when the change should come in. Once again, we will get into those—in some detail, I am sure—at about half-past 10.

I join the hon. Lady in welcoming the decision that has been made about Glasgow. This will be an important move to get broadcasting talent out of London and into the rest of the country, so that the whole country can benefit from it.

T4. [907415] **Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con):** As well as the world’s best beer, one of the things that brings people into our pubs is live music. What assessment has the Minister made of the importance of the music industry’s contribution to our economic and cultural health?

**Margot James:** It is a vibrant industry. Just today, UK Music has published a report showing that the music industry is outstripping the rest of the economy in terms of growth, and I know that it is doing very well in my neighbouring constituency of Dudley South.

T6. [907417] **Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** A few months ago, some vandals burned down Spennymoor cricket club in my constituency. It is proving very difficult to get the insurance money and raise enough funds for a rebuild, so will the Secretary of State tell me where we could get some money so that a second season is not lost for the young people in the area?

**Jeremy Wright:** I do not think the hon. Lady will be surprised to know that I had not heard of this incident. Now that I have, perhaps she will allow me to look into it and write to her about what might be the best way forward.

T5. [907416] **Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con):** What steps is the Department taking to increase the participation of young people in sport?

**Jeremy Wright:** It is extremely important that young people participate in sport. My hon. Friend will be aware of our recently announced school sport strategy to enable just that to happen. We think it important that young people remain active and, of course, that they participate in competitive sport, too, for all the many benefits we know it brings.

T7. [907418] **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** With the world transplant games due to take place in less than a year’s time in Newcastle Gateshead, may I ask the Secretary of State what support he is giving to the games and urge him to give the best possible support that he can?

**Jeremy Wright:** We wish those games every success, and if there is practical assistance we can provide, we are very happy to talk to the hon. Lady about what we might be able to do beyond what is already happening.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** On the principle of better late than never, I shall call the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) to ask a question now as she missed her question earlier. It is perhaps a good idea always to get here a bit earlier. Nevertheless, I wish to hear the hon. Lady, and I am sure the House does.

**Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** Many thanks, Mr Speaker, and apologies.

Next week, I will be holding Cheadle’s ScamSmart event to inform local residents about how to deal with consumer protection and address nuisance phone calls. Does the Minister agree that the bosses of companies that bombard people with unsolicited phone calls should feel the full force of the law and be directly liable for fines, to prevent them from doing this in future?

**Margot James:** It is a pleasure to see my hon. Friend, who raises a very important issue. Nuisance calls are not a victimless crime: they are a source of fear and intimidation to many older people and vulnerable groups. So I agree that those who flout the law on a persistent basis should be held to account, and that means directors being personally liable. That is why we have just completed a consultation on how we bring this into force, and company directors will face, potentially, fines of up to half a million pounds if it is decided on.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I am sorry, but unfortunately demand massively exceeds supply, so this will have to be the last question.

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):** The Minister may not be aware that I am currently in discussions with the National Audit Office to establish its right to examine BBC commissioning contracts worth less than the threshold of £1 million. Does she agree that that would be a good idea, particularly for openness and transparency at the BBC, and that failure to do so will leave the suspicion that it has something to hide?
Margot James: The hon. Gentleman is right that we are hoping for greater transparency from the BBC. Ofcom recently identified this as an area for improvement in its report on the BBC.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Leaving the EU: Rights of EU Citizens

1. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Whether he has provided the Prime Minister with legal advice on the rights of EU citizens after the UK has left the EU.

2. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Whether he has provided the Prime Minister with legal advice on the rights of EU citizens after the UK has left the EU.

3. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Whether he has provided the Prime Minister with legal advice on the rights of EU citizens after the UK has left the EU.

4. David Linden: The Prime Minister said that EU citizens’ rights will be unilaterally respected. Does the Attorney General agree that that statement does not provide sufficient legal guarantees in the case of no deal and that the best way to guarantee EU citizens’ rights is the ring-fencing that has already been agreed in the draft withdrawal agreement?

5. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether he has provided the Prime Minister with legal advice on the rights of EU citizens after the UK has left the EU.

6. Tommy Sheppard: In the event of no deal, EU citizens are trapped after Brexit in other parts of Europe. Has the Government provided any legal advice on this?

7. Michael Fabricant: The Attorney General has been rather reticent in his replies. Would he recommend that hon. Members watch the video of him at the Conservative party conference, as that would answer many questions? [Interruption.]

8. Chris Bryant: Does the Attorney General confirm that EU citizens should have no concerns about their legal rights, especially given the Prime Minister’s commitment that they will be guaranteed in all circumstances?


10. Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Attorney General has been rather reticent in his replies. Would he recommend that hon. Members watch the video of him at the Conservative party conference, as that would answer many questions? [Interruption.]

11. Mr Speaker: It is a question that warrants an answer, but more particularly, if the Attorney General does get to his feet, we shall enjoy more of his baritone.

12. The Attorney General: I am most obliged, Mr Speaker. I am afraid that I did not quite catch my hon. Friend’s question, but if it referred to me in the video, I think that I am best taking the fifth amendment.

13. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Can the Attorney General confirm that EU citizens should have no concerns about their legal rights, especially given the Prime Minister’s commitment that they will be guaranteed in all circumstances?


15. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What advice is being given to UK citizens living in the EU in the event of no deal?

16. The Attorney General: The Government are currently in dialogue with all countries where EU citizens are living. The Government are making certain that the case is being made to those Governments for reciprocity, but this Government will none the less, whatever the position, ensure that those living in this country from the European Union are treated fairly and generously. That is what this country would expect, and it is consistent with the character of the people of this country. Their rights will be protected and guaranteed.

17. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary yesterday told the Foreign Affairs Committee that the Foreign Office is doing work on what will happen if UK citizens are trapped after Brexit in other parts of Europe because there are no flights. Can the Attorney General tell us how many people that will affect and which circle of hell they will be in?

18. The Attorney General: I am not able to give the hon. Gentleman that detail. It is not my sphere of ministerial responsibility. Much as I would like to answer for every aspect and part of the Government, I cannot answer that question, but if he wishes an answer, I will write to him about it.

19. Michael Fabricant: The Attorney General agree that EU citizens can take great comfort from the clear commitments that have been given in the case of no deal and that they should therefore ignore the scaremongering from the separatists on the Opposition Benches?
The Attorney General: I quite understand why, at a time of national uncertainty, those affected by this situation might be worried, but let me say from the Dispatch Box on behalf of the Government that they should not worry. The fact is that their rights will be protected. This Government are determined and committed to that.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Despite that answer, is it not the case that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 only copies EU law until the moment that the UK Government decide to adopt different provisions, which, as far as immigration issues are concerned, is likely to be soon after Brexit? Does the Attorney General agree that that would leave EU citizens in a precarious legal position, especially without any agreements regarding pensions, social security aggregation and access to healthcare?

The Attorney General: The arrangements under the withdrawal agreement as far agreed would provide for the comprehensive protection of all the rights of EU citizens, on both pensions and social security.

Exploitation of Vulnerable People

2. James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting crimes involving the exploitation of vulnerable people.

The Solicitor General: The Crown Prosecution Service has had considerable success in prosecuting cases involving the exploitation of vulnerable people by gangs. The number of offences charged and prosecuted under trafficking and slavery legislation has risen year on year to 340 last year, and last month we saw the successful prosecution of Zakaria Mohammed, who is believed to be the first person to be jailed under modern slavery laws in respect of the exploitation of children.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the use of some of the youngest and most vulnerable people in our society for county lines drugs trafficking is a particularly pernicious offence? What is the CPS doing to crack down on that activity?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the menace of organised crime and county lines. The CPS has developed an approach to county lines, particularly when it comes to the investigation and prosecution of offences involving vulnerable people—in other words, how to treat them and whether they should be treated as victims or defendants.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The anti-slavery charity Hope for Justice has said that two thirds of UK modern slavery victims are in the waste industry. The Environment Agency is training its staff to spot this exploitation. What liaison is the CPS having with the Environment Agency on this matter?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. The waste industry, car cleaning and such activities are clearly a focus for this type of unlawful behaviour. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service are indeed working with other agencies, but I take the particular point she makes and I will re-emphasise it to the CPS.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my hon. and learned Friend tell the House what the CPS is doing to support and protect vulnerable people who have been the victims of crime in order to secure their valuable evidence?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the victims. I have mentioned the decision to be made about the vulnerable victims of human trafficking. We have a particular mechanism that we use to protect the position of people who might otherwise be in the country unlawfully and to give them support so an informed decision can be made about their involvement in the process. I am confident that the CPS is working very hard always to improve its approach to victims.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The number of rapes reported has more than doubled since 2013-14, yet the Crown Prosecution Service’s “Violence against Women and Girls Report 2017-18” highlights a 23.1% fall in the number of defendants charged with rape compared with the previous year. Why does the Solicitor General think this has happened?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. Since those figures have been obtained, I and others have been working very hard to establish what the often complex reasons for them are. Sadly, I think that a lot of them are long-standing ones. What is sometimes unattractively described as the rate of attrition, as well as the experience of victims in this service, is still something that needs to be dealt with fully. That involves not just the CPS end of it, but the very early stages of the investigation. I assure him that every effort is being made to try to close that gap in a meaningful sense.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I hear the Solicitor General’s words, but clearly actions are necessary, too. This is a deep concern. I am sure that he will have seen the recent story in The Guardian newspaper that staff at the Crown Prosecution Service have been told:

“If we took…weak cases out of the system, our conviction rate goes up to 61%.”

Clearly, decisions to prosecute are subject, under the code for Crown prosecutors, as the Solicitor General knows, to the evidential test and the public interest test, not to some kind of arbitrary decision to get the figures up. Has that been said, and if it has been said, what action is he going take?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that any suggestion that there should be an artificial target that trumps the tried and tested code for prosecutors would be wholly wrong. I will absolutely make sure myself, as will others within the CPS, that such observations—if, indeed, they have been made—are ones that carry no weight whatsoever.
The strategic objectives of the Crown Prosecution Service are always reviewed in my meetings with the Director of Public Prosecutions. I am pleased to see that progress has been made by the CPS in many areas in fulfilling those objectives.

May I take this opportunity to welcome the new and incoming Director of Public Prosecutions, Max Hill? He is a very experienced member of the Bar—a man who has prosecuted successfully in many cases—and I am expecting that he will lead the service to new strengths. At the same time, may I put on the record today the gratitude that I feel and the public should feel to Alison Saunders, the outgoing director? She has been a decent and honourable public servant. She has served the CPS for 30 years, including five years as its leader. She has left the CPS in a condition where, in many areas, she has achieved notable success. I wish her well, and I hope that the whole House will wish her well, in her future endeavours.

George Freeman: I am sure that the Attorney General agrees with me that nobody needs an effective CPS more than the victims of crime. Will he join me in welcoming the appointment of the new chief inspector of the CPS, and will he reassure me that the recently published victims strategy will sit at the heart of the CPS 2020 strategy so that the victims and witnesses of crime get the care and respect they deserve?

The Attorney General: I entirely confirm that. Victims are at the heart of everything that the CPS should be—and is—doing, and I agree with my hon. Friend about the appointment of Mr McGinty. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and as he knows, I am currently considering structural changes to the governance arrangements, and they will be announced in due course.

Mr Speaker: If the Attorney General is to refer to his hon. Friend about Mr Hill QC—a barrister of the very highest standing—Alison Saunders and Mr McGinty, who greatly impressed our Committee with his rigour as inspector? The Attorney General referred to proposals to reform the governance of the Crown Prosecution Service, and when we investigated the issue of disclosure, there was some concern about the potential ambiguity in how the role of superintendence over the CPS works. Will the Attorney General give us his thoughts on how that issue might be strengthened and clarified?

The Attorney General: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and as he knows, I am currently considering how further detail and structure could be given to the statutory superintendence role. It is important that in that role I ensure—in so far as it is appropriate to do so and while protecting the fierce independence of prosecutorial decisions that the CPS rightly shows—that I am able to understand more clearly how matters are developing, for example, in connection with disclosure. I am therefore considering structural changes to the governance arrangements, and they will be announced in due course.

Domestic Abuse Victims

4. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps he is taking with the CPS and Cabinet colleagues to improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice system for victims of domestic abuse.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Tackling domestic abuse is a top priority for this Government, and we are committed to securing justice for all victims. We have seen improved conviction rates—in 2017-18, the conviction rate for domestic abuse cases increased to 76.4%, which is the highest rate ever recorded.
Robert Halfon: In June 2012, Eystna Blunnie, a 20-year-old pregnant young lady was brutally kicked to death by her ex-fiancé, Tony McLernon, two days before her due date in Harlow. She sadly died in hospital and doctors were unable to save the baby. Despite McLernon's death threats prior to the attack, he was not charged, and police assessed Eystna as being at “medium-risk” of domestic abuse. What changes has the Crown Prosecution Service made in how it decides to bring charges in cases of domestic violence, and what specialist training is given to CPS solicitors to deal with cases of domestic abuse and violence against women?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend and to the family of the victim for their dignity in the face of such tragedy. Steps have indeed been taken as the result of that case and others, for example: the existence of a victims’ right to review policy on prosecution decisions; the use of local scrutiny and inclusions panels to consider violence against women and girls cases; and the new offence of coercive control, which can capture cumulative abusive behaviour by one partner against another.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Prosecuting cases of domestic violence is only possible if the police have sufficient officers and resources, so what conversations did the Solicitor General or Attorney General have with the Chancellor about police funding and were they satisfied with the result?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady knows police funding is a question for an announcement in December and the forthcoming spending review next year. I reassure her that the number of flagged referrals on domestic abuse from the police is remaining steady at about 110,000 in the past two years. As I have said, the number and rate of prosecutions continues to rise. We have seen a rise of over 50% in domestic abuse prosecutions in the past 10 years.

Terrorism Prosecutions

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Dealing with illicit finance through the prosecution of money laundering offences is a priority for the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office. Prosecutors have not identified any specific concerns regarding the effectiveness of prosecutions under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. We continue to use the Act, as it has evolved, to good effect.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans he has to undertake a review of the effectiveness of prosecutions under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

Christian Matheson: I have a constituent who has been convicted, I believe wrongly, for fraud. Despite the prosecution accepting that he made no financial gain whatever from the allegations, the SFO went after him and his wife, who is entirely unconnected. Does the Solicitor General think that is fair and what possible avenues for redress do I have for my constituents?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the case. It would be invidious of me to comment on a particular case. I will simply say that there are different mechanisms within the Act that allow the pursuance of criminal proceeds. It might well be that in that case another mechanism is being used, but I will be happy to look at it further and write to him.
Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018
- Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds) Act 2018
- Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018
- Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018
- Middle Level Act 2018.

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals

10.39 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the Government’s new approach to fixed odds betting terminals.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government do not have a new approach to fixed odds betting terminals. The reduction in stakes for fixed odds betting terminals is an important change and it is the right thing to do, but there are several factors to consider in determining the date from when it should take effect. The most important, of course, is to do this as soon as possible to prevent further harm. The Government were urged in an early-day motion in June this year and by the all-party group on fixed odds betting terminals not to wait until April 2020 to do so, and we have not done so. But it was also right to consider planning to reduce the effect of job losses for those working in betting shops on the high street and allow time for that planning to take effect.

It also has to be recognised that, right though this change is, money for public services coming from the use of FOBTs has to be replaced, or public services will have less funding. The Chancellor has decided to do that with an increase in remote gaming duty, and it is right that that increase happens at the same time as the FOBT stake change. There also needs to be a proper period of notice after the setting of that new rate before the change to remote gaming duty takes effect. The Government have therefore concluded that October 2019 is the best date to make both changes.

However, the Government have always made it clear that the issue of problem gambling is complex and cannot be addressed through these measures alone, so work has been continuing to strengthen protections around gaming machines, online gambling, gambling advertising and treatment for problem gamblers. The Gambling Commission launched a consultation on protections around online gambling last month. This examined stronger age verification rules and proposals to require operators to set limits on consumer spending until affordability checks have been conducted. There will be tough new guidance from the Committee of Advertising Practice on protecting vulnerable people, with further guidance on protecting children and young people introduced before the end of the year. Public Health England will carry out a review of the evidence on the public health impacts of gambling-related harm and, as part of the next licence competition, the age limit for playing national lottery games will be reviewed to take into account developments in the market and the risk of harm to young people.

While we want a healthy gambling industry that contributes to the economy, we also need one that does all it can to protect players. This is a significant change that will help to stop extreme losses by those who can least afford it, and we are taking decisive action to ensure that we have a responsible gambling industry that protects the most vulnerable in our society.

Tom Watson: It was a very good day for both sides of this House back in May when the Minister for Sport and Civil Society, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), announced this document
and that the Government would reduce fixed odds betting terminal stakes. Everyone on both sides of the House was led to believe that that cut would take place in April 2019, at the start of the new tax year. Why was that? Because in answer to a written parliamentary question, the Minister herself said that the enabling statutory instrument would be taken this autumn and verbally confirmed, in a minute meeting of the all-party group on FOBTs, that that would be the case.

On Monday this week, the Chancellor announced that the cut in stakes would be further delayed by six months. This is extremely disappointing, not least because the Secretary of State’s predecessor also implied to the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) that April would be the date.

Research shows that half of people struggling with problem gambling have had thoughts of suicide. The bookmakers will pocket an estimated £900 million because of this delay. This amounts to a betrayal of the promise made by the Secretary of State’s two predecessors and of the Government’s own three-year review, which was meticulously conducted by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford. When the Government themselves have admitted the social blight of FOBTs, it seems incomprehensible and inconceivable that they would delay a policy supported by many people on both sides of the House and in both Chambers.

Has the Minister resigned? If not, why is she not here answering this urgent question or sitting by the Secretary of State on the Front Bench? She has presumably had time to freshen up since travelling on the red eye from the US.

When did the Secretary of State read the report on gaming machines and social responsibility measures? He failed to answer the question earlier in oral questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). Had he read it when he indicated to the DCMS Select Committee that the policy could be delayed? What discussions did he have with the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford before he decided to delay the policy? On what dates—I have informed his office of this question—did he meet the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), a well-known advocate for the industry, to discuss FOBTs?

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford did the right thing in announcing this policy, and the House supported her, as did those working to eradicate gambling addiction. In capitulating to the gambling industry, the Secretary of State has not just let the victims of gambling addiction down; he has let his own team down, and ultimately he has let himself down.

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) is doing an outstanding job as the Sports and Civil Society Minister, and the hon. Gentleman is right that she deserves a outstanding job as the Sports and Civil Society Minister, and the hon. Gentleman is right that she deserves a

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Today is heavily subscribed and there will be a significant number of Members who wish to take part in the final day’s debate on the Budget who will not be called simply on account of time. That is the brutal reality. This matter is important and Members must be heard—and they will be—but the Secretary of State has been called to the House to answer this question and he must be afforded the courtesy of being able to answer it without excessive noise.

**Jeremy Wright:** The last point I was going to make was in relation to the Government’s response to the review. I reiterate that it was not solely about the reduction in fixed odds betting terminal stakes. Important though that is, the report covers several other issues. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) asked whether I had seen it. I have—it is here. It is important for the House to recognise not only the substantive decision, but that there are a number of other things that we need to do together to tackle problem gambling in this country. I have no intention of stopping here. I have no doubt that my ministerial colleagues feel the same. I would not expect any other Members who feel passionately about the subject to do so either.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): In May, I was enormously proud of my Government for taking a bold and important decision that put lives ahead of profits. I assumed, after the APPG investigation, that the industry itself recognised that it needed about nine to 12 months to implement this. That would have taken us to April or May next year. The complaints about the delay for another year were specifically about that, not about April next year. I say to my right hon. and learned Friend that it is not too late. For the sake of those people whose lives and families have been destroyed, and many more may yet follow them, I urge him to think again and bring forward the date so that we may end this scourge.
Jeremy Wright: The whole House has respect for my right hon. Friend’s passion on this subject and his commitment to change. Of course, he is not alone and I am sure that many other Members will speak who also deserve huge credit for their consistent efforts. I simply say to him that I have tried in my response to set out the logic of how we balanced out several different factors in making our decision. None includes consideration of the profits of the betting companies. There are considerations about the livelihoods of those who work in betting shops and it is perfectly proper for the Government to make them. He will know that, if we did what the betting companies wanted, the change would not be made at all. We have done this contrary to the strong wishes and consistent argument of the betting companies because we believe it is the right thing to do.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) for introducing the urgent question. We know—and the Government have acknowledged—the damage caused by fixed odds betting terminals. It has been accepted that, to reduce the harm, reducing the maximum stake to £2 is required. Until that is implemented, the acknowledged harm continues. For technical and other reasons that we have heard, but that I believe are questionable, the implementation date has been set at October 2019. We have already heard what the original date could have been, but that is to miss the point. Every day we hesitate results in additional debt, increased gambling-related harm and, tragically, the possibility of more suicides relating to these machines. That is not a price worth paying to placate the bookmakers or a handful of Back Benchers. There is cross-party support for an implementation date in April 2019. Any later is tantamount to negligence and will be resisted at every opportunity.

Jeremy Wright: No, I do not accept that it is negligence to take the approach we have taken. It would be negligent not to take into account all the relevant considerations in making this decision. I think I have been as clear as I can be: the profit margins of the betting companies are not one of the relevant considerations. However, it is appropriate for us to think about the economic impact of this decision on those who work in the high street and it is appropriate for us to think about the necessary notice to be given not just for the FOBT change, but for the remote gaming duty change. Although I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman’s passion on this, I know where he argues as he does. There is no monopoly in this House on compassion for those who suffer from problem gambling and its effects. We have had FOBTs in this country since the early 2000s and this is the Government who are taking action against them in order to make the substantive change that he and I will agree needs to be made.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that implicit in what he and the industry have said is that there has indeed been a direct correlation between FOBTs on the high street and the proliferation of betting shops on the high street? If this decision on the new £2 stake is to be delayed, will he ask the betting companies to make additional contributions to charities that work with gambling addiction and problem gambling from the additional profits they will make from that delay?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend will have heard me say that I do not accept that this is a delay at all, and as I hope he will have picked up from my other remarks, I think there is more to do on problem gambling. I do not believe that, whenever we implement this change, that is the end of the story. There is a huge amount more to do and that will require action on the part of the industry as well as of Government.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), is certainly a very principled person, whom I respect enormously, and I would not be surprised if she resigned over this delay. The betting industry is prepared for this change. The machines can be changed in a matter of months, so there is no reason for this other than the fact that the biggest profiteer from the tax from these machines is HM Treasury. The Treasury has won its argument against this Secretary of State because he told the DCMS Select Committee last week that he was not convinced about the reasons for the delay, so why have we got one?

Jeremy Wright: Again, it is not a delay. In relation to the reasons, yet again, I have made the point that I am not convinced by the argument that we should concern ourselves with the profit margins of the betting companies, and I am not doing so, but there are other factors that we need to take into account, and that is what we are doing. This is not just about the ability of those on the receiving end to adapt to the FOBT change; it is also about their capacity to adapt to the change to remote gaming duty. Both of those are important and they come together to make the decision the Government have made.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is right in saying that we have had fewer than nine years since the change in Government—these ghastly machines came in in 2001—but early-day motion 1440 does say that April 2020 is too late and asks that the change be made immediately.

A number of MPs have been at this for some time. The Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), did help to get the Government to realise that coming down to £50 was wrong, that £20 would be wrong and that £10 and £5 would be wrong, and said she would be grateful for the figure to be £2, but we also share the general concern at the delay for the extra six months.

Jeremy Wright: On delay, I entirely understand that my hon. Friend and others want this to happen as soon as possible, and so do I, but he will know from his experience of Government that there are a number of factors that Governments always have to balance in making these decisions. That is not always easy and it certainly is not always popular, but it is important that we make this decision stick. He is right that it is a long time in coming, but the worst thing that can happen now is that we make this decision in a way that ends up unravelling because we have not made the necessary preparations and done this in a careful enough way. That is the objective here: to make sure that the substantive change that he has worked so hard for and that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has worked so hard for does not just happen, but lasts.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We have all heard the Secretary of State’s excuses and explanations, his logic and his fears of the decision unravelling, but does he accept that the suspension will persist in this House that they are simply excuses, that the delay is unacceptable and that the Government are accepting that lives will be ruined by these gambling machines rather than taking action?

Jeremy Wright: Again, it is this Government who are acting. That is why this substantive change is being made. It is precisely because of the damage that the hon. Lady describes that we are doing this. The argument we are having this morning is about the point in time at which implementation happens. What I have set out are not excuses but the reasons for the judgment that the Government have taken. Let us not forget that it is this Government who are making the change, and that their predecessors did not do so.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In his Budget statement, the Chancellor referred specifically to wanting to reduce the tragedy of lives being lost to suicide. This is clearly a measure that could be taken; the industry has had ample time to prepare for it. May I urge the Secretary of State to reconsider and to bring forward the date on which remote gambling duty is brought in, so that it can cover the costs that he has mentioned in relation to protecting public services? The tragedy of lives being lost to suicide has to be our absolute priority here, and there is good evidence for this measure. I urge him to think again and to bring it in.

Jeremy Wright: I have huge respect for my hon. Friend’s passion on this subject, and for the approach that she takes to issues such as this. I hope she will accept that there is no lack of enthusiasm on my part for countering the harms that she has described. The reason that we are making this decision is not because we believe it is important to pacify the betting lobby. Had that been the case, we would not have made this decision.

Jeremy Wright: The all-party parliamentary group on fixed odds betting terminals, which poked the horns’ nest and brought us here today, I am incandescent, as are other Members across the House—including, I would argue, the Minister for sport, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). If she does resign, it will be a great loss to her Front Bench, because her integrity and bravery surpass those of anyone else I see in here today. What is happening to the families who are losing children? What is happening to the children who do not get Christmas presents because of an addictive parent? What happens to the people who have to go to food banks because they have an addiction to these machines? Don’t give me warm words—give me action. April 2019! We cannot lose any more lives because of these dreadful, dreadful machines.

Jeremy Wright: Among the many Members who deserve huge credit for bringing us to a place where this change is to be made, the hon. Lady ranks high in the list. She has done a huge amount to help ensure that this change happens. She asks for action, and she will have action. This change will be made. She deserves a large amount of credit for it, but I hope that she will not overlook the fact that it is this Government who are making it happen at her urging. We will deliver this change in a way that makes it stick and realises the benefits that she wants to see.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Government’s response to the consultation noted that B2 gaming machines are frequently located in areas of high deprivation and that, frankly, they are ruining lives. Does my right hon. and learned Friend not think that he is engaging in pure semantics when he says that a period of time from April to October next year is not a delay when every Member of this House can see that it is?

Jeremy Wright: I do not accept that. I do not believe that this is about semantics. My right hon. Friend is a distinguished lawyer and knows perfectly well that it is
important for the Government to approach their decision making in a way that is defensible and takes all the necessary considerations into account. That is exactly what we are seeking to do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I express my concerns and my constituents’ fears about the delay in bringing forward the FOBTs legislation and what that will mean for those with addictions and their families? We cannot forget about the families. I simply and honestly urge the Secretary of State to introduce the legislation earlier. My constituents demand that and so do I.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his commitment to this cause. Again, he is one of those who have made the case for change consistently and should share in the credit for it happening. However, it is important, as I have said several times, that the change happens in a way that is defensible and delivers the benefits that he and I both want. It would be quite wrong to characterise this argument as one between those who want the change and those who do not. An overwhelming majority in this House want the change, and I am very much among that majority. However, it is important that it sticks, and that is what we are trying to ensure.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Having been heavily involved in discussions on this issue, I can confirm that not only the betting industry but the racing industry, which is supported by bookmakers, fully expected the change to be implemented in April 2020, so the change is in fact being brought forward.

FOBTs are not the most dangerous form of gambling; they are the fifth most dangerous. I suggest that my right hon. and learned Friend takes into account the losses that will be suffered on the high street in terms of the jobs of men, women and young people, who will also suffer poverty, and the losses to the horse racing industry. I therefore suggest that he allows both the bookmaking and horse racing industries sufficient time to make the changes that might mitigate those losses.

Jeremy Wright: I understand what my hon. Friend says, but I would argue that we are allowing sufficient time for those industries to adapt. He is right that we need to consider such issues, but we have done that, and our approach properly allows those industries to adapt as they ought to and also allows the Government to do whatever we can to mitigate any economic harm that might arise from this measure—necessary and right though it undoubtedly is.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): With household debt at record levels, why are the Government delaying the implementation of a measure that would go some way towards mitigating one cause—problem gambling?

Jeremy Wright: Again, there is no delay here. We are attempting to bring forward these measures and implement them in a way that balances a number of factors. The most important factor, beyond question, is the wish to minimise the harm that the hon. Lady describes, and that is what we are doing. Were we not interested in that, we would not be making this change at all, and were the charges I have heard from Opposition Members right, we would not be talking about it at all, because there would not be the implementation of a FOBT stake change to discuss.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In March 2018 the offshore gambling company GVC bought Ladbrokes, which is based in my neighbouring constituency, for £3.7 billion. Part of that package was £700 million in compensation to shareholders who would lose out as a result of FOBT stakes being reduced. However, that option ceases if the statutory instruments are put through this place and the other place before midnight on 27 March 2019. When will my right hon. and learned Friend introduce the SIs for this House and the other place to implement?

Jeremy Wright: We will do that as soon as we can. My hon. Friend, although I do not doubt what he says, will recognise that I do not think it proper for Government to take account of such commercial arrangements, which need to be made in view of whatever risks the market believes there will be. We will make this decision based on the criteria I have set out so that we can make this change in the most defensible way.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We have heard from Members on both sides of the Chamber that lives are being lost and families are being affected. Last year, according to the NHS, record numbers of people were hospitalised through gambling addiction. Does the Secretary of State think that mental health provision for problem gamblers is adequate?

Jeremy Wright: As I have said, I think there is a good deal more to do. The hon. Lady is right to say that the problem of gambling addiction, with all its negative consequences, is not limited to these machines. There is something particularly pernicious about these machines because of the way they operate and the way people use them, but there is a broader problem here. She is also right to say that, at least in part, a response needs to come from the health service. That is why I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is looking carefully at what we might do in his field and that the chief medical officer is also considering this matter. As I have said, I believe there is more to do, and I am interested in options for how we might pursue that. If there is more action we can take, I intend to take it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I believe that action should come sooner rather than later—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—but what is the Department’s estimate of the number of job losses? What will the Department do to make sure that those who lose their job are helped to get another one?

Jeremy Wright: It is difficult for anyone to be specific about the figures, because it depends, of course, on how the industry responds to the position we present to it. On the second part of my right hon. Friend’s question, we seek to work across Government, including in my Department, the Department for Work and Pensions and others, to ensure that if there are to be job losses as a result of this right and necessary decision, we do all
we can to mitigate their effects on the people who work in betting shops. This is not about company profits; it is about the economic wellbeing of the people who work in those shops. They also deserve consideration, and we will make sure they get that consideration in how we approach this decision.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Has the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), threatened to resign over this delay?

**Jeremy Wright**: I have made it quite clear what I think about my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford as a Minister. She is doing a great job, but in the end this decision on FOBTs has to be taken, and is being taken, by the Government collectively. I am very happy to come to the House to explain the logic for the decision, which is what I have done this morning. It is a joint decision for the Government to make.

**Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): This is a hugely important reform. Does the Secretary of State agree that we have to get it right and make it stick? Will he look at further measures to restrict the gambling industry such as those taken in Estonia, including measures to restrict gambling advertising in and around sports events?

**Jeremy Wright**: I agree with my hon. Friend; there are examples we can look at around the world, and we will want to do that. The point he makes about advertising is important; there is a good deal we may be able to look at in the advertising field, and we intend to do that.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): At the end of this month, universal credit is being rolled out in my constituency, so I hope the Minister will inform my constituents that the decision to implement this legislation will come sooner rather than later, so as not to compound the poverty and aggravation that his Government are causing them.

**Jeremy Wright**: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s premise, but he has just heard me say that mitigating the effect of these changes is a cross-Government process, and the Department for Work and Pensions is fully engaged in it.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Many times it is right to come to the House to criticise a Secretary of State, but it is entirely unfair to do so today. The Secretary of State has come to answer an urgent question and Opposition Members are demanding a junior Minister, which is very strange. In addition, he is doing what the House wants and introducing something, yet he is criticised. On the point he raised about advertising, does he think the Government should work with the industry to remove advertising in live sport before the watershed? I think such advertising has a lot to do with problem gambling.

**Jeremy Wright**: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s remarks, and I understand the point he makes. He will recognise that significant progress has been made on this. For example, gambling advertising targeted at young people can no longer happen. We are looking at further ways in which we can tighten up advertising, as indeed are the other responsible bodies. I shall be considering what he says, along with many other possibilities.

Two hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I am sorry, but we have a lot of business to get through—we have the business question and then the debate on the Budget—so we really must now move on, but the Leader of the House is not here, and she does need to be here.

**Mr Bone**: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker**: No, there are no points of order now. I am sure the Leader of the House is not far away. The hon. Gentleman is a very co-operative fellow, and I know he is always keen to help the Front Benchers with his points of order—not. I am sure the right hon. Lady will be here momentarily, but there is huge pressure on time and I have to make a judgment as to whether the relevant issues have been covered. /Interruption./ Well, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) wins brownie points for what I shall call “interrogative entrepreneurialism”.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Evening Times reports that there are more than 800 FOBTs and 200 betting shops in the city of Glasgow alone, and that £31 million a year is lost to these machines. What does the Minister say to my constituents, who are losing out every day to these machines?

**Jeremy Wright**: I say to the hon. Lady’s constituents what I say to everyone’s constituents: it is this Government who are prepared to do something about it.

Two hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker**: The Leader of the House is here, and we are grateful, so we can now move on to the next business.
11.17 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

Monday 5 November—A general debate on the Dame Laura Cox report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff, followed by a general debate on road safety.

Tuesday 6 November—A general debate on the centenary of the armistice.

The business for the week commencing 12 November will include:

Monday 12 November—Second Reading of the Finance (No. 3) Bill.

Tuesday 13 November—Opposition day (18th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

Wednesday 14 November—A debate on an Humble Address relating to the Prince of Wales’s 70th birthday, followed by Second Reading of the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill.

Thursday 15 November—A general debate on the veterans strategy.

Friday 16 November—The House will not be sitting.

Today marks the start of Men’s Health Awareness Month, which is an opportunity to raise awareness of the health—including mental health—issues that affect men, including suicide. In the UK, men remain three times as likely to take their own lives as women, and I wish good luck to everyone taking part in events this month.

During the short recess, I will be taking part in two events here in Parliament: the annual Youth Parliament debate in the Chamber; and the international women MPs’ conference, where female parliamentarians from around the world will come together to mark the centenary of some women winning the right to vote in the UK.

Next week will also see Hindus celebrate the victory of light over darkness, good over evil and knowledge over ignorance. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing all those celebrating the festival of light a very happy Diwali.

Before the next business question, we will have commemorated the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day. Many will attend services of remembrance throughout the country to honour the great sacrifice made by so many men and women during the war. Following discussions with your office, Mr Speaker, I advise all Members that on Tuesday 6 November, the House’s sitting will be suspended from 1.45 pm to 3.15 pm, so that Members can attend the remembrance service in St Margaret’s church. Wherever we are on the 11th day at the 11th hour, we will remember them.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for what she said about the upcoming session of the UK Youth Parliament on 9 November. I am delighted that she will be here and I believe that the shadow Leader of the House will be here, too. I look forward to chairing those proceedings for the 10th successive year. The Youth Parliament is a huge credit to the young people of this country, and I hope that if Members happen to be available, they might be willing to pop in and demonstrate their support for the future of our democracy and of our country.

Valerie Vaz: The Leader of the House has clearly done her daily mile today! I thank her for the forthcoming business and ask again for the Easter recess dates. Will she confirm that there is no truth in the rumour in the other place, where they think they may not get the February recess? Will she confirm that we will definitely have the February recess?

I was going to ask about the immigration White Paper, which the Minister for Immigration said would be coming forward “very soon”—it was due a year ago—but it seems that the Minister may have something more important to explain, because she might have misled the Home Affairs Committee. It seems that she said one thing and her Department has put out a statement saying something different. Will she come to the House to explain what the exact position is?

Is the Leader of the House aware that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union may be in the same position? He said in a letter dated 24 October that he was “happy to give evidence to the committee when a deal is finished and currently expect November 21 to be suitable.”

Has a deal been signed? Has it been signed off by the Cabinet? Does the Secretary of State know something that the House does not? When will he come to the House to explain what he said, which seems to be at odds with his Department? Has the Cabinet signed off the financial services plan that we have heard about this morning?

Will the Leader of the House ensure that both those Ministers come to the House to explain their position as soon as possible—perhaps on Monday? Will she also ensure that the Secretary of State for International Trade comes to the House? According to a written ministerial statement on the trade remedies authority published last Friday, the Secretary of State seems to be appointing people to a body that does not yet exist—it does not have any legal status and we have not even debated it in the House. That is three Ministers so far.

Will the Leader of the House please explain the blatant breach of the ministerial code in the Government’s not enforcing the rule established by clause 9.5 of the code, which states that the Opposition should be provided with a copy of a statement? I do not think one was given to the Leader of the Opposition before the Budget statement. When is the Leader of the House going to stand up to this abuse of process? The Government are tearing up the Commons rulebook; no wonder they do not want any other rulebook.

The Leader of the House mentioned the Youth Parliament session next Friday; I am sure that you prefer chairing those debates, Mr Speaker, to chairing Prime Minister’s questions. It is the Youth Parliament’s 10th time here, so will the Leader of the House ensure that this is scheduled for a debate on whatever particular issue the Youth Parliament votes to be most important? That would be really helpful. The Opposition also welcome the Women MPs of the World conference, and
we thank the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for their work. We also thank all the staff who have worked hard behind the scenes to ensure that the conference is a success.

The House was seen in a good light last Friday, when we debated important Bills. It was a productive day, with the House at its best. The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), passed its Third Reading; the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), passed its Third Reading; and the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), passed its Report stage and Third Reading. There were some powerful speeches by Members last Friday, and it would be a pity if the Government did not support that last Bill all the way through Parliament.

The Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) has received its Third Reading in the other place. It has cleared both Houses and will now become law. It is known as Seni’s law, in memory of Olaseni Lewis, who died in September 2010 after being restrained by 11 police officers, and it crucially restricts the use of force against mental health patients. To follow up on a point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Chris Bryant) earlier this week, will the Leader of the House announce additional days for private Members’ Bills as the House seems to be doing so well?

This is Justice Week. The Treasury’s report shows that the resource budget for the Ministry of Justice will be cut by £300 million, and there is nothing about legal aid. Access to justice is a fundamental necessity for a properly functioning society. There is nothing for local government. Walsall Council has proposed ending the community alarm system. Many vulnerable people, particularly those living alone, will be unsafe or will have to pay £14 a week, and the cost of services is shifted on to council tax payers. Our Walsall Manor Hospital A&E is desperate for extra money, but it has to bid for it.

What about the “little extras” for teachers’ pay? Since 1992, Governments have implemented the School Teachers’ Pay Review Body’s recommendation in full. This year’s is for 3.5% but, flouting convention, the Secretary of State for Education has ignored it, which means that nearly 60% of teachers will not get the recommended pay rise. Will the Secretary of State for Education come to the House and explain that?

Members should note an email from the Jewish Leadership Council, which is collecting messages of support for the community in Pittsburgh following the heartbreaking murder of worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue. I encourage all Members to send those messages, and we send our condolences to them. People go to a synagogue to pray. We also send our heartfelt condolences to the families, friends and wider Leicester community of those who perished in the helicopter crash last Saturday.

We will not be here next week, as the Leader of the House said, but we will be in our constituencies commemorating the ultimate sacrifice of people giving up their lives to save others. I welcome the suspension of the sitting of the House next Tuesday, Mr Speaker, so I thank you for that, as it means that we can all attend St Margaret’s. The Royal British Legion has commissioned a special “khadi” poppy—that is a type of cotton—to pay tribute to the huge contribution made by the Commonwealth in the first world war. More than 1.3 million Muslim, Sikh and Hindu men volunteered with the Indian Expeditionary Force, and Indian troops were awarded more than 13,000 medals for gallantry, including 11 Victoria Crosses. Let us remember the contribution of everyone—men and women around the world—and let us stop the hate of each other and work for tolerance and peace.

Let me end on a slightly upbeat note: Lewis Hamilton—champion, champion, champion, champion, champion. We congratulate him and also British engineering. Finally, I wish everyone a happy Diwali as we move from the darkness of recent times into light and new beginnings.

Mr Speaker: What the shadow Leader of the House says about Lewis Hamilton is absolutely right and should be trumpeted from the rooftops, but we should also congratulate Roger Federer on winning the Swiss indoors tournament for the ninth time—his 99th career title. I was there to see him in Basel and it was pretty spectacular stuff.

Andrea Leadsom: Of course, Mr Speaker, we all love tennis, but I have to say that Lewis Hamilton is part of a Brackley-based team in my constituency, so I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in congratulating the team on that amazing triumph.

I also join the hon. Lady in sending our condolences to the families of all those who perished in Pittsburgh. It really was the most appalling attack, and it should be the case that those who pray and worship should be able to do so in freedom and safety. I also join her in giving our condolences to the families of all those who died in, and were affected by, the appalling helicopter crash at Leicester football ground. That was a real tragedy and one that I know moved many people, not least my own apprentice, who was at that match and very deeply affected by it. The hon. Lady was right to raise those issues.

The hon. Lady asked about the Easter recess and asked me to confirm that we will have our February recess. We will have our February recess. I can confirm that we will have the short recess from 6 November to 12 November; that we will rise for the Christmas recess on 20 December, returning on 7 January; and that we will rise at close of business on Thursday 14 February, returning on Monday 25 February. Further recess dates will be announced in the usual way. I would just gently say that I was moved to look back through time and I discovered that in 2010—the last year of the Labour Government—the Easter recess date was announced on 18 March 2010, just 12 days before the start of that recess. I sincerely hope to be able to improve significantly on that performance by the hon. Lady’s Government.

The hon. Lady raised the question of the no-deal scenario for EU citizens. To be clear, the Government have confirmed that
“in the unlikely event of not reaching a deal with the EU the UK will honour its commitment to all EU citizens, and their family members, resident by 29 March 2019 that they will be able to remain in the UK.”

The hon. Lady also asked about what was said in the Home Affairs Committee. I can simply confirm that employers already need to carry out right-to-work checks on EU citizens and that will not change. EU citizens need to provide their passport or ID card.

The hon. Lady asked about the comments of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. As all hon. Members know, the Prime Minister has said that we are 90% to 95% of the way there in negotiating what is a very complicated trading arrangement for the future, as well as withdrawal arrangements for the UK as we leave the European Union. There are still some significant questions to be answered and we are working at pace to achieve those answers. My right hon. Friend will update the House as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about international trade. Questions to the Department for International Trade will take place on 15 November, so I hope that she will be able to direct her questions to Ministers then.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, I think that we will all be delighted to hear the debates of the Youth Parliament in this place. The young people will be very welcome and I look forward to speaking to some of them myself—they are the future.

I share the hon. Lady’s happiness at the progress of some private Members’ Bills, and I am glad she is pleased that the Government have been able to help the progress of some of them. I commend all hon. Members who brought forward their private Members’ Bills last week and assure the House that I intend to bring forward further PMB dates very soon.

With regards to justice and the hon. Lady’s concerns about the budget for legal aid, a debate in Westminster Hall at 2 pm today will provide an opportunity for Members to ask questions. With regard to the Budget response on education, questions will take place on 12 November, and I hope that hon. Members will attend.

I want to finish on a slightly upbeat note. At the Budget, the Chancellor was able to inform the House that unemployment is at its lowest rate since the 1970s; that youth unemployment is at a new record low; that the number of children living in workless households is at a record low; that real wages are rising; that the gender pay gap is at a record low; that the share of jobs on low hourly pay is at a record low; that our economy is continuing to grow; and that borrowing this year is at its lowest level for 16 years. These are real things, being delivered by a Conservative Government, that the whole House should share in enjoying, promoting and supporting during the Budget vote later today.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If somewhere in the deep state there was knowledge of a plan to kidnap Mr Khashoggi and he was not tipped off, we would be complicit. The Foreign Secretary would not comment, but can we have time to debate this?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend knows well that we are extremely concerned about this case. The UK has been active in calling for answers about the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which we have condemned in the strongest possible terms. The Prime Minister spoke to King Salman on 24 October and reiterated our desire for a credible explanation following a full investigation. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has announced that those who have been implicated in Mr Khashoggi’s murder would be prevented from entering the UK. We will continue to press the Saudis to co-operate fully with the Turkish investigation.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

A chill is in the air and, like winter, Brexit is coming. The undead White Walkers of the ERG have breached the wall and Westminsteros is under siege. While the Prime Minister is no Mother of Dragons, she does have her fire-breathers to contend with, and she might just be about to be consumed by the flames. In the battle with the 27 kingdoms, we are told apparently to expect 21 November as the date for a Brexit agreement, only for DExEU to issue a statement downplaying the significance of that date. Can the Leader of the House explain what exactly is going on? When will we have the meaningful vote, on what conditions and what basis will it be put to the House, and what range of options will we have to consider? Can she assure us that the meaningful vote will not be a meaningless vote?

Later today, we will be voting on the Budget resolutions. We in the SNP are very pleased that the Chancellor has listened to our representations to freeze duty on whisky. However, we are not too happy about some of the other issues to do with the Budget. On Tayside, we are extremely disappointed that the UK Government did not match-fund the Scottish Government in the £200 million pledge for the Tay cities deal, breaking the arrangement whereby each Government contributes equally. Can we have a debate on city and regional deals in Scotland, and ensure that the UK does not short-change communities north of the border again?

I want to support the calls by the shadow Leader of the House regarding EU nationals. We really do need a statement from a DExEU or Home Office Minister. Apparently only 650 of the 3.5 million people who need to apply for settled status have gone through the process. The Immigration Minister said in the Home Affairs Committee that determining people’s status would be tricky during the planned two-year transition period. This is raising all sorts of alarm, concerns and anxieties in constituencies right across the United Kingdom, where EU nationals now need to be absolutely reassured about their status here, so will the Leader of the House ensure that we have a Minister at the Dispatch Box on Monday so that we can question them about what is going on?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman mentions various excerpts from “Game of Thrones”. All I would say to him is: “You know nothing, Jon Snow”—and I am afraid that that is often the case in this place. However, I shall hope to be able to enlighten him.

On the meaningful vote, it is absolutely the case that this House will be invited to give its views and to lend its support to the deal that the United Kingdom will be seeking to agree with the European Union. It will be
vital that we have that approval in order to proceed. Such a motion will be a motion of the House and it will be amendable. But to be very clear, it will be important—as I said last week and, I think, the week before—that the Government have the permission of the House to go ahead with a deal that has been agreed. If they do not have that permission, they will not be able to proceed with that deal. I do hope that that clarifies the matter for the hon. Gentleman.

I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is pleased that whisky duty has been frozen. I am more pleased that good old Northamptonshire gin duty has been frozen. Perhaps we can compare notes at our next one-to-one meeting.

The hon. Gentleman asks what else has been done for Scotland. First, I would like to congratulate him: I gather that his latest MP4 record, EP5, is out. In fact, my team logged in and listened to one or two of his tracks this morning. I do wish him every success. It is available from all good retailers, in case hon. Members wish to purchase it. [Interruption.] You have the opportunity, Mr Speaker, to buy the hon. Gentleman’s latest record. It is going to be fantastic.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about what else has happened as a result of the Budget, the Chancellor has announced that the Scottish Government’s budget will increase by over £950 million through to 2021, before adjustments for tax devolution. There will be £150 million invested in the Tay cities deal. We continue negotiations on the borderlands and Ayrshire deals, and we will begin formal negotiations on a Moray deal. As an ex-Energy Minister, I am particularly delighted that we continue to support the oil and gas industry in Scotland—a vital sector for Scotland—to ensure that Scotland becomes a global hub for decommissioning. We will continue to support the United Kingdom in every way that we possibly can.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Over the last two nights, I have had the pleasure of hosting very full community events in the House to celebrate the cultural and spiritual side of Diwali. There are no business questions next week, and I shall be attending 11 temples on Hindu new year. May I invite my right hon. Friend to wish Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists “Shubh Diwali” for next week and, if she finds time, to accompany me on one of those visits to a temple?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend and share his good wishes to all those celebrating Diwali next week. I am impressed that he intends to visit so many different celebrations, and if my diary permits, I would be delighted to go with him.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): By the calculations of the officers of the Backbench Business Committee, we have had 24 Chamber days in the last 16 months, when the Standing Orders suggest that we would get 27 days in a normal 12-month sitting period. We are three short already, and we do not have any allocation of time in the week beginning 12 November. I want to express my disappointment to the Leader of the House, on behalf of the Committee and Back Benchers across the House who have heavily subscribed but unallocated debates yet to be heard on subjects such as protection for homebuyers in new build properties, appropriate treatment for sufferers of ME, the Rohingya refugee crisis, International Men’s Day or victims of Equitable Life. All those and others are as yet unheard debates, but we have no allocation of time yet again. I am disappointed.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is disappointed. He will realise that it was important to prioritise the Budget debates this week. Standing Orders specify that the Backbench Business Committee is allocated 35 days each Session, and, as I acknowledged last week, although this is an extended Session, the Committee has already had more than the number specified in the Standing Orders. I will work closely with him, however, to find other dates.

I point out gently that in response to requests from hon. Members for Government time to be given to debates that have also been priorities for the Backbench Business Committee, we have held debates on subjects such as the use of folic acid, the centenary of Armistice Day and, importantly, road safety, which I know the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) has been keen to pursue. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, and I of course will seek Back-Bench time as soon as possible.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Leader of the House, in replying to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), confirmed that we are going to have a meaningful vote on the Government’s agreement when it comes back from Brussels, and she confirmed that we are going to have meaningful votes, because there will be amendments to that motion. She was of course right to say that the Government cannot ratify the draft agreement if this House rejects it, but does she accept that the meaningful votes on the amendments mean that if an amendment is passed, the Government will feel that they should go back to Brussels and try to negotiate a deal as amended by the majority of this House? I hope she is not reverting to the argument “It’s the deal we’ve got or no deal at all,” which the Government were defeated on when we debated the withdrawal Bill earlier this year.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to point out the facts of the case, which are that the Government will bring forward a vote on the deal that they have negotiated, it will be an amendable motion of the House, and should the House amend that motion, the Government would take action on those amendments. However, I must point out to the House again that having negotiated a particular deal with the European Union, it may well not be possible for the Government to proceed on the basis of an amended motion. Whether the House will be asked to decide whether it agrees that the Government negotiate on the basis of the agreed deal will be a matter for the House.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Over 1 million young people participated in the UK Youth Parliament’s “Make your Mark” campaign, and ending knife crime has topped the ballot as young people’s No. 1 priority. As has already been said, that will be debated in the Chamber on 9 November, and I will be joining the young people for that debate here. This is a clear priority, so I will ask for the fourth time: when will the Government schedule a debate on their policy of using a public health approach to tackling violence?
Andrea Leadsom: As I have previously said to the hon. Lady, I wrote to Home Office Ministers in response to her questions in this place two weeks ago. I am waiting for a reply, about which I will update her directly. She has also written to me on this issue and I have taken it up, as I said I would. A few months ago, she requested Government time for a debate on our serious violence strategy, which I was pleased to be able to provide, so there was a debate quite recently on that subject. Furthermore, as I understand it, the Youth Parliament will be debating this next week as one of the issues that it has raised. On 2 October, the Home Secretary announced further measures to address violent crime, including a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence, as well as a new £200 million youth endowment fund and an independent review of drug misuse. I hope to have further updates once I hear back from Home Office Ministers.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Last week, the chief exec of Somerset County Council wrote a rather pathetic begging letter to the Government. This week, we discover it is going to spend £10 million on one building. May we have a debate in this place on local government finance, so that chief execs across the country get the message that this is not up for grabs? Local government funding matters to us all?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of local government financing. He is clearly concerned about his particular area, so I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate in which to raise that issue directly with Ministers.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): At Forest Hill School in my constituency, class sizes have gone up but per pupil funding is down by £191. The Chancellor’s money for “little extras” equates to just £45 per students, which goes nowhere near restoring the cuts to schools in my constituency. When can we have a stand-alone debate in Government time on education funding?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Lady will be as delighted as I am that there are now 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010, and that 86% of schools in England are now rated good and outstanding, which is up from 68% in 2010. Many more children are getting the opportunity of a good education than under the previous Government. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of school funding. We are investing £1.3 billion in our schools, so the schools budget will rise by about £2.6 billion over this year and next, which means per pupil funding is protected in real terms. If she has a particular question, she may wish to ask it at Education questions on Monday 12 November.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, Sara Thornton, is reported in this morning’s media as having suggested that the police should refocus and concentrate more on burglary, shoplifting and violent crime. That is something my constituents would widely support. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on this so that the Government can make their position clear?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the importance of good policing in reducing the number of traditional crimes as well as in dealing with the recent rise in serious violent crimes, such as knife crime and the problem of county lines. He will be aware that we have increased the total investment resources available to the police by over £460 million, and announced a significant increase in counter-terror police funding for next year. It is for police and crime commissioners to decide the priorities in their own areas. My hon. Friend may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss the issues in his own constituency.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As the House will be aware, it has been my custom and practice to try to call everybody at business questions. Very occasionally, I have not been able to do so, but that has been the norm. It will not be possible to do so today, and it is only fair to give the House notice that I want to run this for another 10 minutes or so, but not beyond that because 77 hon. and right hon. Members wish to speak in the final day’s debate on the Budget.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Leader of the House might be aware of early-day motion 1768 in my name, which concerns my constituent Delsie Gayle who was racially abused on a Ryanair flight from Barcelona.

[That this House notes the entirely unprovoked and racist verbal attack on Ms Delsie Gayle onboard a Ryanair flight from Barcelona to London; further notes that Ryanair moved her and not the abuser, and has since failed to move the perpetrator but instead moved Ms Gayle to another seat; points out that Ryanair have still not contacted Ms Gayle or any member of her family; condemns Ryanair’s tolerance of a clear case of racism; and calls on the airline to conduct an immediate inquiry and to offer an unreserved apology to Ms Gayle.]

Ryanair moved her and not the abuser, and has since not contacted the family, either directly or indirectly. May we have a debate on racism?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will have been shocked by that story, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it in this place. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the matter.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Director-General of the National Crime Agency has drawn attention once again to the problem of so-called county lines, which the Leader of the House mentioned a moment ago, and which involves drug networks that extend from urban to rural areas. Lynne Owens reported that 1,500 county lines are now operating in Britain, and it is feared that thousands of children are being used to move drugs. This is a case of feckless so-called recreational drug users—no doubt disproportionately drawn from the privileged bourgeois liberal class—making life a misery for those who are less privileged. Edmund Burke said that good order is the foundation of a good society, so may we have a statement from a Home Office Minister, in Burkeian terms, describing how good order can be maintained?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an issue that concerns all hon. Members across the House, and the Government’s serious violence strategy is looking...
at what more we can do to prevent young people from getting involved in that appalling criminal lifestyle. We are investing significant sums through a new early intervention youth fund, and we are providing millions of pounds through the Home Office anti-knife crime community fund to help communities that are tackling knife crime.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In my constituency many horse riders have written to me expressing their dismay that in the review of The Highway Code that has been announced, there is no mention of horses or their riders. May we have an urgent debate on the review of The Highway Code? I obviously welcome anything that makes things safer on our roads, but we cannot ignore the plight of horses or their riders—it is too important.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and the safety of horse riders is key. There is a debate on road safety on Monday afternoon, and the hon. Gentleman might wish to raise the issue then.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am delighted that next week we will be able to debate the centenary of the Armistice. In a similar manner, as we approach the last few weeks of the suffrage centenary, may we have a debate on the sacrifices made by those brave women in their fight for the right to vote? What more can we do to celebrate that important anniversary?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right. This year has already seen some amazing commemorations and it is not over yet. Next week we welcome female MPs from around the world to a conference held in this Chamber, and 21 November is Ask Her to Stand Day in Parliament, which is organised by 50:50 Parliament. On the 100th anniversary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women Act) 1918, I hope that every Member will invite a “bloody difficult woman” from their constituency to Parliament, to see for themselves the difference that they could make through a career in public life.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Many if not all of us in this place will have constituents or loved ones—perhaps even ourselves—who depend on the continued and reliable availability of lifesaving medicines. Given that the Prime Minister did not quite give a guarantee to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on Wednesday that that will continue should we leave the European Union, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate to reassure the public that there is no danger of a loss of those medicines?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government are taking every step necessary to deal with any eventuality, including the unlikely event of no deal, and to protect the supplies of medicines wherever we need to do so.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May we have a debate on the huge contribution of unpaid carers and the support that councils up and down the country give them, which is currently under threat because of other priorities?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that we all pay tribute to the amazing work done by unpaid carers. They need as much support as possible. My hon. Friend may wish to raise this issue directly with Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government at its next question time.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Two months ago, the Government were told that they were no longer compliant with the Human Rights Act 1998 in relation to widowed parent’s allowance. When will we have a statement that will allow the 3.3 million cohabiting couples, should they lose a partner, to access that benefit for the benefit of their children at a time of great loss in the family?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. I advise her to raise it in a parliamentary question direct to Ministers, as it does need a specific answer. She will be aware of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), which aims to enable opposite sex civil partnerships and which I certainly hope will go some way to providing a solution for cohabiting couples.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Figures from the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland last week revealed that Moray has the highest share of women who are self-employed. May we have a debate on this issue, so my right hon. Friend can join me in congratulating outstanding businesswomen such as Pearl Hamilton, herself a member of the FSB Scotland policy group, and encourage more women in Moray and across the country to become self-employed?

Andrea Leadsom: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating outstanding local businesswomen in Moray. Since 2010, UK female entrepreneurship has grown. There are now 1.2 million female-led small and medium-size businesses in the UK. According to Women’s Enterprise Scotland, women-led businesses contribute over £5 billion to the Scottish economy. However, I agree with Pearl that more needs to be done. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that in September the Treasury launched a review of the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Saturday 28 October, a gunman walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and opened fire, killing 11 innocent Jewish worshippers. This horrifying attack is part of a wider global trend of rising antisemitism and intolerance of freedom of religion or belief. In the UK alone, there has been a 40% increase in reported race and hate crime, which is mainly targeted towards Muslims and Jews. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on this very pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has already been discussed here today. We all send our condolences to the families and friends of those who were attacked in such a barbaric way. There can be absolutely no excuse for any form of religious or racially motivated attack of this nature.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): More and more residents in my constituency are using mobile apps to communicate with neighbours to discuss security in their community. For instance, the Neighbourhood Watch
app allows residents to pass on and receive news of crime with their local police force. May we have a debate on the benefits of mobile technology in promoting community safety and reducing neighbourhood crime and on how best we can support Neighbourhood Watch groups across the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really interesting idea. I am sure that a Neighbourhood Watch app would be of great interest right across the United Kingdom. I encourage all hon. Members to raise it locally, so they can see whether it would be of value in their communities.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): At a packed meeting this week of the all-party group on the post office network, we were told by Post Office Ltd that its flawed consultation is going to continue with the closure of post offices and that input from MPs would just be “noted”. May we have a proper debate in this House? It is not good enough that this public service is a back office of WHSmith. We need to hold a Minister of the Crown to account.

Andrea Leadsom: I understand that the matter was discussed in yesterday’s Budget debate and there will be further opportunities today. As I made clear last week in business questions, the Post Office does not intend to reduce the number of available post offices. It is changing the way those resources work. For many communities, the post office provides more flexible opening hours and is therefore quite helpful in providing banking and post office services.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In recent weeks, Govia Thameslink Railway has started allowing those who provide ATM machines at their stations to charge over £2. May we have a debate on charging for use of ATMs, as local communities often have no other choice?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and I am really sorry to hear about this. I am sure that it is extremely frustrating for his commuters. This is, of course, a commercial matter between Govia Thameslink Railway, the ATM operator and the ATM network provider, but he might like to apply for an Adjournment debate to raise the issue more widely and see whether Transport Ministers can do anything more about it.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Today, I am wearing a special poppy pin from Poppyscotland, with a poppy and a ship’s bell marking the loss of HMY Iolaire, when at least 201 men perished of the 283 on board off Stornoway at the end of world war one. It is being suitably marked in Scotland, as it is in Newport, we will, as always, be commemorating the Chartist movement and exhibitions to commemorate women’s suffrage this year. What more can we do in the House to debate and commemorate the role of those in the Chartist movement who came before them and the ordinary people whose struggles and sacrifices, as in Newport, have shaped our democracy in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue, which is clearly very important not just in her constituency but across the country. If she attends the Commonwealth women’s conference, she might find the opportunity there to raise this issue, which I am sure will be of interest to women across the world.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Following my question to the Prime Minister yesterday, has the Leader of the House seen my early-day motion 1754 about cutting cancer treatment travel costs for families with young children?

[That this House recognises the immense cost of travel for families driving to specialist hospitals for cancer treatment for their child; notes with concern that research carried out by children’s cancer charity, CLIC Sargent, found that thousands of families of children and young people with cancer across the UK are currently facing an average 60-mile round trip to get their child to life-saving treatment; further notes that the cost of these journeys can mount up to £180 a month when treatment is at its most intense; understands that these extortionate costs are plunging thousands of families into debt; and urges the Government to set up a Young Patient Travel Fund to assist struggling families with these unavoidable expenses.]

Estimates by CLIC Sargent suggest that families are paying £180 a month to look after their children in taking them for treatment. May we have a debate on this subject?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to my right hon. Friend’s question, and I certainly did hear the Prime Minister’s reply yesterday. It is vital that we do everything we can to support people, particularly children, who are suffering from cancers. He will be aware that of the Armistice. That would be an appropriate time to raise the issue of ships lost during the second world war; I am sure that would be in order and he can raise his questions directly then.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This week, the National Football League has announced four regular season games to be played here next year—two at Wembley and two at Tottenham Hotspur’s ground. Could we have a statement next week from the Government on the development of American football in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am thrilled to hear about this exciting, new and no doubt televisual opportunity. My hon. Friend will be aware that we have just had Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, and if he wants to raise it further, he should perhaps do so through a parliamentary question to Ministers.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This weekend in Newport, we will, as always, be commemorating the Chartist uprising of 1839. We have had excellent events and exhibitions to commemorate women’s suffrage this year. What more can we do in the House to debate and commemorate the role of those in the Chartist movement who came before them and the ordinary people whose struggles and sacrifices, as in Newport, have shaped our democracy in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue, which is clearly very important not just in her constituency but across the country. If she attends the Commonwealth women’s conference, she might find the opportunity there to raise this issue, which I am sure will be of interest to women across the world.

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Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to my right hon. Friend’s question, and I certainly did hear the Prime Minister’s reply yesterday. It is vital that we do everything we can to support people, particularly children, who are suffering from cancers. He will be aware that
the NHS’s long-term plan is looking at what more can be done to support children with cancer, and I encourage him to seek an answer directly from Ministers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but as I foreshadowed some minutes ago, we are heavily time-constrained and must now move on.

Points of Order

12.3 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. One of the biggest issues facing the UK economy is whether our financial services sector will have access to the EU once we leave next year. The degree of that access and the terms under which it takes place will have a significant impact on our tax base and employment. Following press reports this morning that a deal may have been agreed, can you advise us whether you have had any notice from the Treasury about a statement coming before this House with details of what that deal might entail?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that I have received no such indication or any approach on the matter, but he has put his point forcefully on the record and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. For now, we shall have to leave it there, but I am grateful to him for alerting us to his concerns.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We were surprised and shocked to hear the announcement this morning that the Appledore shipyard in Devon is to close. It will mean the loss of 200 jobs. I wonder whether the Government will make a statement to the House on Monday about this very serious situation.

Mr Speaker: That is a matter for the Government, although it is perfectly legitimate for the hon. Gentleman to raise the matter through me. I am not aware of any intention to make a statement, but we have until Monday for the Government to choose to do so, if they so wish—they may wish to do so, they may wish not to do so. He will be familiar with the procedures of the House that could be used if he wishes to ensure that the matter can be aired in a suitable fashion and at such length as he thinks appropriate in advance of Monday. He knows what options are open to him.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With the Budget debate so heavily subscribed, as you said earlier today, would it not be possible for the Whips on both sides to do something useful for a change and push back the moment of interruption so that more Members can speak?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks whether it would be possible. The short answer is that it would be unimaginable for such a thing to happen today, because the Order Paper is set for today, and there are good reasons, in the name of the protection of the House more widely, why the Order Paper cannot suddenly be messed around with by Executive fiat. It is not my normal practice to think it necessary to rush to the defence of the Whips. Let them defend themselves as best they can and with such resources as they have available to them. In advance of today—that is to say yesterday—in the knowledge or likely expectation of large demand, however, it would have been open to the Government to do that. But they did not, and we are where we are. The role of the Speaker is to take account of the different interests in the House and the level of concern about particular subjects and to operate accordingly. In that respect, am I much bothered about the views of the Whips on either side? No.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday at Home Office questions, I raised concerns about the UK visa and citizenship application service being operated by the private firm Sopra Steria. An immigration lawyer based in Newcastle has told me that, even though the new centre is opening on Monday, she cannot find out where it is. The Glasgow Scotland and Northern Ireland MP service has told me that it does not know where the Glasgow service is due to be located, and Sopra Steria has told my office that it has not been told anything about it and that it should be on the UK Visas and Immigration website, where I cannot find any information whatsoever. Have you had any indication from Home Office Ministers of a statement or written statement? If people are expecting to turn up at a service on Monday and nobody knows where it is, it seems an excessively high bar for a visa.

Mr Speaker: Sadly, I cannot advise the hon. Lady. My strong advice to her is that she should contact a Home Office Minister today, either directly, if she can, or perhaps with the help of the Leader of the House. It would be a perfectly proper request for her to make of the Leader of the House, although it would be entirely up to the latter what she does in response. That would be the pragmatic course of action that I would commend to the hon. Lady.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will know that there is nothing more unsettling than being uncertain about the future of local government in one’s area. I notice on the Order Paper today that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will be making a written statement on a local government update. As we are waiting in Buckinghamshire to hear the decision on whether we are to have a unitary authority or two authorities in Buckinghamshire, have you had any notification that the Secretary of State will come to the House to discuss this so-called local government update in relation to Buckinghamshire?

Mr Speaker: I will answer the right hon. Lady as succinctly as I can but candidly. The short answer, in the name of transparency, is that I have had conversations with the Secretary of State about this matter purely in my capacity as a constituency Member of Parliament, which other Buckinghamshire Members may also have done, but if she is asking me whether I have been given any indication by the Secretary of State or anyone acting on his behalf that he intends to broach that matter in the Budget debate today, the answer is that I have had no such indication. In my experience in the House, the Secretary of State is among the most courteous and accommodating of Cabinet members, and if he was planning on saying something today, he would probably have told me and would certainly have told somebody as illustrious as the right hon. Lady.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not giving advance notice of my point of order. I am not normally here on a Thursday and the moment just took me. Lots of people have been in touch with me in the past week or so who wanted to speak to me, as either their local Member of Parliament, or a Member of Parliament about whether they can talk to MPs about non-disclosure agreements that they have signed. Can you give me some advice—I am happy for it to be given to me afterwards because I did not give notice of this point of order—about whether those agreements can stop people seeking advice from their Member of Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, which, as she acknowledges, is new to me. I had no notice of it whatsoever. I have a general principle as a serving Member of Parliament about the primacy that should be attached to the relationship between a constituent and his or her Member. However, I could not offer the hon. Lady off the top of my head a legally sound answer. Rather than pretend to know, I say to her that it is a very fair and reasonable point and I understand why she raises it. If she is content, I will reflect on it, take advice and revert to her as soon as I can.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been suggested to me that Doorkeepers are not allowed to wear poppies. Will you advise me whether that is the case and whether, if Doorkeepers wish to wear poppies for remembrance, they are allowed to do so?

Mr Speaker: I am advised that the normal arrangement is that Doorkeepers wear the poppy only on 11 November if that is a sitting day. Again, off the top of my head, if the hon. Gentleman is asking me whether I personally would have any objection to a Doorkeeper wearing a poppy in the way that Members of Parliament frequently do, for a period of days running up to 11 November, I would have none whatsoever. However, the difficulty in these cases—I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand—is that there are normally procedures for determining particular courses of action: what members of staff are or are not entitled to do, and I have to have some respect for the fact that there may have been a process, a procedure or a discussion that led to a decision. Not everything comes across the Speaker’s desk. I certainly do not want to say anything that is critical of a member or group of members of the House staff, or a collective of members of staff who at some time made a decision on the matter. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me personally whether I think it reasonable for Doorkeepers to wear poppies in the run-up to 11 November, I do, but these are matters better dealt with outside the Chamber, rather than through points of order of which one has not had notice. I thank the hon. Gentleman and we will leave it there for now.
Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 31 October).

Question again proposed,
That income tax is charged for the tax year 2019-20.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. As I intimated earlier, approximately 77 Members want to speak and I know that the Front Benches will do their best to tailor their contributions to take account of the extent of interest in the House.

12.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): This week’s Budget was a Budget for our proud public services, jobs, housing, opportunity and enterprise, and a brighter future for every part of our country. Above all, it was a Budget dedicated to the British people and their tireless efforts to rebuild the economy and to bring it back from the brink and the chaos under the last Labour Government. Let us not forget what a mountain we have had to climb.

Thanks to the Labour party, we are running the highest budget deficit in peacetime, with the Government having to borrow £1 for every £4 they spent. It has been difficult to turn that around, but the families and communities that make up this great country can be confident that their hard work and the Government’s balanced, long-term approach have paid off.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the measures in the Budget, particularly those to help small shops on our high streets—they will transform our high streets. Will my right hon. Friend set out what the Budget and the Government are doing to ensure that we have more affordable and social housing?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his early intervention. I intend to cover several housing announcements, but he rightly underlines the Government’s commitment to build the homes that our country needs. We want councils, housing associations and the private sector to build, thereby meeting the challenges and problems that the broken housing market has presented. The Government are determined to fix that.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): If the Secretary of State is serious about house building, where is the funding in the Budget for the Bakerloo line extension, which would provide not only vital transport infrastructure for south-east London, but bring with it house building—private house building as well as 5,000 social housing homes and 2,000 genuinely affordable, London living rents?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting transport infrastructure. The additional £500 million that the Chancellor announced for the housing infrastructure fund is firmly about investing in that infrastructure to deliver the housing agenda. I will come on to an announcement in the Budget about London and investment in transport infrastructure. It may not be the one that the hon. Gentleman was looking for, but support for the docklands light railway, unlocking housing growth in that part of London, was an important announcement.

The results speak for themselves: the economy has been growing for eight years, over 3.3 million more people are in work, wages are growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade, the deficit is down, national debt is falling, and the number of households where nobody works is down by almost 1 million. Those are huge strides that we risk at our peril. It has taken eight years to secure those hard-won gains, and it is clear that the Labour party would undo all that good work.

The Government are not content with just clearing up Labour’s mess. We have to live within our means, but we have bigger ambitions. We want to build a country in which there is opportunity for all and no one is left behind.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State repeated what the Chancellor said on Monday—that the wage growth enjoyed in the past year was the best in the decade. Does he accept that that is easy to say, given that the past decade has been the worst for wage growth in 210 years?

James Brokenshire: I underline to the hon. Gentleman that we have seen that wage growth but there has also been employment growth. Three million jobs have been created under the Government and the Red Book forecasts the creation of 800,000 more.

The important measures in Monday’s Budget that backed our public services, including the NHS in its 70th year, that cut income tax for millions and increased the national living wage, and that ensured that we are open for business and investing in our future, deliver our promise. The Budget delivers for families and communities and provides a major boost for the quality local services on which we all depend.

When I was appointed to this role, I said that I could not be more proud to represent those communities and the dedicated people working so hard on their behalf in local government, and I meant it. I am under no illusion about how challenging it has been for councils to deliver in recent times as they contributed to helping us to put the economy back on its feet. In recognition of that, we have given local authorities more control over the money they raise, for example, through our plans for increased business rate retention from 2020. We know that the pressure on services have been growing, including around social care.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I want to take the Secretary of State back to what he said about the position the Government found themselves in in 2010, when of course, his former right hon. Friend, George Osborne, promised to eradicate the deficit by 2015.
They failed to do that, and now there is no target date at all in the Budget for eradicating the deficit. Why that dramatic change?

James Brokenshire: I have to say in the nicest possible way that it is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to make that point. Labour’s spending plans would cost £1,000 billion. It is an extraordinary sum of money, and all the people up and down the country would bear the cost of the debt for borrowing.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): My right hon. Friend is making a typically powerful speech. Will he tell the House how the measures in this Budget will help young people on to the housing ladder, particularly as since 2001 home ownership levels have halved for people aged between 16 and 35?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The steps under this Government have led to an increase in home ownership, and the first time buyer rate has started to increase under this Government. This has been a challenge and initiatives such as Help to Buy have been important in realising that ambition and the aspiration for people to be able to own their own home. There is also the investment in social and affordable housing through our specific £9 billion programme, which is firmly focused on that.

I want to come back to my point about local government and the pressures we recognise have been growing especially around social care. That is why I am delighted that the Chancellor committed around £1 billion of extra funding for local services, with a strong focus on supporting some of our most vulnerable groups. That includes £650 million for adult and children’s social care; £240 million of that will go towards easing winter pressures next year, with the flexibility to use the remainder where it is most needed for either adult or children’s services. That is on top of the £240 million announced last month to address winter pressures this year.

In addition, the Budget pledged an extra £84 million over the next five years to expand our successful children’s social care programmes to more councils with high or rising numbers of children in care, and an extra £55 million is being made available for the disabled facilities grant in England in 2018-19. This new funding will allow councils to take immediate action to deliver the services their residents need while protecting them from excessive council tax bills.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and having been an elected councillor for the last decade, I have become all too aware of the devastation wrought on local government by the continuing cuts in previous Budgets. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the Chancellor has missed a massive opportunity to reverse those cuts so that local government can provide those much needed services?

James Brokenshire: If the hon. Gentleman looks at what the Budget is delivering—I have already referenced the additional funds being provided around social care, which we have seen as one of the pressures—over the last two years the budget has been going up in real terms. I hope that, as a member of the Select Committee, he would recognise that. I pay tribute to the work local government has done up and down the country in delivering quality local services, against the backdrop of the challenges we have had to deal with as a consequence of the actions of the last Labour Government, and there are serious—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Does the House not want to hear the Secretary of State? [HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] I thank hon. Members; that is a straight answer. Hon. Members do not want to hear the Secretary of State, but I tell them that while I am here this will be done fairly and everyone will get a chance to be heard, even the Secretary of State.

James Brokenshire: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

There are serious long-term decisions to be made about the social care system and how we place it on a sustainable footing, not least how we ensure that health and social care are better aligned. I am working closely with the Health Secretary on this and we will be publishing our Green Paper on the future of social care shortly.

The Budget also provided a further £420 million to help councils to carry out repairs on our roads—money that will help to improve access to workplaces, high streets and other community facilities. I will have more to say about overall funding for local government when I publish the provisional local government finance settlement later this year.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, just as I was grateful to him for meeting my constituents from New Ferry, but when they heard the Budget on Monday and heard about the investment he is talking about for potholes, they felt abandoned once again. There was nothing in the Budget for the people in New Ferry, who face absolute devastation, as the Secretary of State knows well.

James Brokenshire: I am very conscious of the particular issue the hon. Lady highlights to the House, and indeed I greatly appreciated the opportunity I had to meet her constituents, to hear their stories and to hear about the impact the devastating incident has had on that community. I am still considering what the options are, to see how the regeneration can be provided and work can be conducted with the local authority, so I very much look forward to continuing to remain in discussion with the hon. Lady on what I know is a very serious and significant community issue.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

James Brokenshire: I will give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: Obviously the £650 million for social care is welcome, but does the Secretary of State accept the Local Government Association figures that the gap next year is actually £2.6 billion? Has he any concerns at all about comments from leaders in East Sussex, Surrey, Somerset and Lancashire, all Conservative county councils,
that they are facing a cliff edge that they are likely to fall over at some stage unless the Government take more dramatic action?

James Brokenshire: There has been a recognition of the important step that has been taken in the Budget with the additional funding provided for adult and children social care and how that will make a difference. I will of course look carefully to the future in discussions I will have, through the spending review, on long-term financial support for our local government sector, the innovation and real value I see in local government—which it delivers for our local communities—and I will remain a proud champion for local government. But, as I said, local authorities also have a huge role to play in helping us to build the decent, affordable, secure homes that families and communities so desperately need and deserve. As the Prime Minister has said, this is our biggest domestic priority.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does not my right hon. Friend agree that more money has gone into services over the years and into communities, but these accusations of cuts are directly as a result of Labour’s great recession?

James Brokenshire: As I said at the outset of my speech, we have had to make those difficult decisions and I know so many people have contributed to this—the British public up and down the country. This Budget is indicating how we are now turning things around and looking positively at what our country can be and what it can do, and how we should be optimistic about our future.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I look forward to welcoming my right hon. Friend to Solihull on Friday. Has he seen the report in today’s Times that there has been a surge of activity in UK house building over the last three months, with the greatest number of new homes signed off since the global crash? Is the truth not that Britain is building again, and just because of this Government’s policies?

James Brokenshire: The National House Building Council figures published today are very encouraging about the levels of building activity. We must build the homes our country needs, and we are firmly putting in place a number of steps and measures to help deliver on that. I know there is more to do, but we should recognise that progress is being made. We need to continue to see everyone building across the economy, because as a country we have failed to build enough homes over the decades under successive Governments. As a result, the most basic of needs—a place to call home—is out of reach for many, particularly our young people.

That is changing, thanks to this Government. Since 2010 we have delivered more than 1 million new homes and helped nearly half a million families get on to the housing ladder through Help to Buy and the right to buy, and we are taking action to ban the unjustified use of leaseholds on new homes, crack down on rogue landlords, ban unfair letting agent fees and cap deposits, and end rough sleeping for good.

We should contrast that with the record of the Labour party; not only did housing become more unaffordable under Labour, but under the current Labour leadership it has consistently voted against the reduction in stamp duty, which has helped more people get on to the housing ladder.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): A key part of the housing market is the second-hand market, of course. First-time buyers are now making a strong comeback because of the brave measures we took in relation to buy-to-let landlords—changing the stamp duty and the way we treat interest—which means that first-time buyers are now not only on a level playing field but in many parts of the country have the upper hand again.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights some of the important steps that have been taken and the impact that they are starting to have, but we know there is much more to do. We know that we need to be bolder and much more radical if we are to fix our broken housing market, make it fairer and match Harold Macmillan’s record by delivering the 300,000 homes a year that families and communities need. That ambition was set out back in 1951, and we will do it again.

This Budget does that and more. By building on the Chancellor’s commitment last year to a five-year, £44 billion housing programme, it reaffirms this Government’s commitment to restoring the dream of home ownership, most notably by securing the future of Help to Buy past 2021 and ensuring that the new scheme is targeted at first-time buyers, who need it most, and includes regional property price caps through to 2023. With most first-time buyers now exempt from paying stamp duty following last year’s Budget, benefiting more than 120,000 buyers so far, this year’s Budget went a step further by extending that relief to all first-time buyers of shared ownership properties worth up to £500,000 and making it retrospective. That is good news for anyone who aspires to own their own home.

Ultimately, however, there is no way we can help more families to get on to the housing ladder without getting Britain building and getting local authorities to play their part. That is why the Chancellor’s confirmation that we are removing the biggest barrier—the Government cap on how much councils can borrow to build more—is such a game changer. It will free up councils to deliver around 10,000 homes a year. It has been great to see how warmly this has been welcomed by councils up and down the country, and how ambitious they are about making the most of this opportunity to deliver the next generation of council housing. We are also supporting housing associations to deliver at scale and pace, with the Chancellor’s announcement of the next wave of deals with nine housing associations, worth £653 million, which will deliver a further 13,000 affordable housing starts by March 2022.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that if we are really going to address the housing crisis we need to build between 50,000 and 100,000 new social homes for rent, and that this Budget is not delivering on keeping that promise? Will he consider giving councils the first right of refusal on public land and allowing them to purchase it at current use value rather than at the development price?
James Brokenshire: I am sorry if the hon. Lady does not recognise the important steps that are being taken in the Budget, including allowing councils to borrow in order to invest in new housing growth, our commitment to our affordable homes programme and our long-term deals with housing associations, all of which are making a difference.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that we are attempting to build three new garden communities across north Essex. That will necessitate building the infrastructure to go with them. What is he doing to assist us in that endeavour, which will of course supply some of the houses that are needed in north Essex?

James Brokenshire: I very much welcome the authorities that are coming forward with ideas for garden towns and villages, which will be an important part of the vision of a home becoming a reality for more people and of meeting our intent to provide 300,000 new homes per year. I would point my hon. Friend to the housing infrastructure fund, which is focused on delivering the infrastructure and support that allows housing growth to take place. It is important to recognise the additional support that the Chancellor has provided for that initiative in the Budget.

Councillors and housing associations undoubtedly have a lot to contribute when it comes to helping us to build more homes more quickly, as do our small and medium-sized builders, which is why Monday’s Budget bolstered continuing efforts to support their revival and market diversification with £1 billion of new guarantees implemented by the British Business Bank. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for his review of the vital issue of large strategic housing sites. I look forward to studying his report in more detail, and I will respond more fully in the new year.

Whether through further reforms to planning or securing the future of Help to Buy, we are helping families, communities, buyers and renters in the private and social sectors, both now and in the long term, and in the process we are changing lives. As I have said before, this is not just about building more homes; it is about building stronger communities. Those communities need to know that the right infrastructure, transport links and other essential services are in place to support new developments. It was therefore great to see the Budget boosting the housing infrastructure fund by £500 million, bringing the total funding to £5.5 billion and potentially helping to unlock 650,000 homes. It was also great to see the Budget providing £291 million of grant funding for vital infrastructure on the docklands light railway in east London, which will ease pressure on existing services in the area and generate more than 18,000 homes.

James Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned communities across north Essex. That will necessitate building the infrastructure to go with them. What is he doing to assist us in that endeavour, which will of course supply some of the houses that are needed in north Essex?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly refer that private Member’s Bill to the colleagues who have direct responsibility for those issues. I think the hon. Gentleman’s broader point was about the vibrancy of our high streets. Banks, post offices, shops and other businesses are intrinsic to creating the sense of a community hub. Our high streets are the heart of our communities, and they are greatly valued. We need vibrant high streets where commerce and communities meet and where people from all backgrounds can come together. I think that is recognised across the House.

It is concerning for many people to see our high streets struggling as shopping habits change, which is why this week’s Budget made it a priority to champion them and help them to adapt, with a significant £1.5 billion package of support. That includes a cut to business rates for small retailers worth almost £900 million over two years, reducing their bills by over a third and amounting to an annual saving of up to £8,000 for a wide range of independent shops, pubs, restaurants and cafes. But we are not just providing short-term relief for our retailers; we are also setting out a long-term vision for our town centres, with a £675 million future high streets fund to help councils transform their high streets by making the necessary improvements to infrastructure and transport and by redeveloping underused retail space into homes to help to secure their future.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is laying out his plan for towns, but does he not agree that the plan needs to be inclusive and give young people something positive to do? Youth services have seen massive cuts of more than 60% in real terms since 2010. This Budget does not seem to be investing in young people. Should it not be doing so?

James Brokenshire: I certainly acknowledge the need to ensure that we are inclusive and that we are thinking about the next generation, and there are opportunities for that in what we are seeking to achieve on our high streets and in the creation of jobs, growth and opportunities. A sense of aspiration and ambition resides firmly at the heart of our approach as a Government. We are seeing youth unemployment coming down, and we are creating a sense of ambition and opportunity. I want to underline the huge benefits that the Government are delivering.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Secretary of State makes a powerful point about maintaining our communities, and he will know that this Budget contains the starting elements of the arc between Oxford and Cambridge via Milton Keynes, which has the potential for more than 1 million houses being built across that swath of middle England. Does he agree that, in building those 1 million homes, we must be cautious that we do not sacrifice fragile environments such as the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty,
which could easily be buried under concrete if the project is not planned exceedingly carefully and the necessary protections are not put in place?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for underlining that arc of opportunity between Oxford and Cambridge—I know that it is very relevant to her and her constituency. We are giving the matter careful consideration and working with colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Transport on bringing it together. This is about how we can unlock opportunity, about creating transport infrastructure and housing, and about jobs and growth, but it is also about doing it carefully, thoughtfully and sensitively. I understand the relevant point that she has raised, and we will obviously continue to do that work as we look to unlock the area’s potential in a thoughtful way.

I am confident that the measures for the high street, which include a relaxation of planning rules to support mixed-use businesses and extra support for local leaders, will see our high streets flourishing again at the heart of our communities.

We have come a long way since the dark days of Labour’s great recession. With this Budget, we are seeing the hard work of the British people paying off and paving the way for a better future. As the next chapter of our islands’ story unfolds, we will be free to chart our own destiny and seize the opportunities that that brings. We will be delivering on the things that matter most to our families and communities: more homes, world-class public services, help for the most vulnerable, and hope for our high streets. Our best days lie ahead of us. It will be a positive future that is not for the few or for the many, but for everyone.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, I say to Members that it will be obvious that more people are indicating that they wish to speak than there will be time for this afternoon. We will start with a limit of seven minutes, but that will be significantly reduced as time goes on. However, the limit does not apply, of course, to Mr Andrew Gwynne.

12.41 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, after “tax year 2019-20” insert “provided that the condition in paragraph (2) of this resolution is met.”

(2) The condition in this paragraph is that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has, no later than 5 April 2019, laid before the House of Commons a distributional analysis of—

(a) the effect of reducing the threshold for the additional rate to £80,000, and

(b) the effect of introducing a supplementary rate of income tax, charged at a rate of 50%, above a threshold of £125,000.”

We have had the fiction and now it is time for the fact. It is a pleasure to open the final day of the Budget debate for the Opposition. This Budget was sold as ending austerity, but it does not do that remotely. It is a Budget of failure; a Budget of broken promises.

Labour is not opposed to any modest benefit—however modest that may be—for lower and middle-income earners, but that measure is the only one that puts some money in their pockets. We also need to support those who do not reach the lower threshold, which is why we support a real living wage, and the restoration of sectoral collective bargaining and trade union rights. However, putting more money into the pockets of higher earners is obviously wrong, which is why the next Labour Government will increase taxes on only the very wealthiest—people with incomes in the top 5% and the corporations that have had a tax cut under the Tories.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify what the Opposition would regard as “the very wealthiest”?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman was clearly not listening. It is in our amendment and was in our manifesto at the last general election. We mean the people in the top 5% of incomes, and Labour’s amendment sets out the changes to income taxation that we would introduce in order to achieve that.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the people who are in the income bracket that he describes are likely to be the most mobile and will therefore simply take their wealth somewhere else?

Andrew Gwynne: It is interesting that Conservative Members seem not to want a fair taxation system whereby those who have done the best out of society can pay back into society.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 caused £34 billion of cuts, resulting in 14 million people, including 4 million children, living in poverty? The Government have reduced the deficit by taking from the poor instead of from those who have much more—the wealthy.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Whatever this Government say, austerity is far from over for the people who require our help through the social security system.

Turning to communities, it was only a few weeks ago, in a speech that began with the Prime Minister dancing across the stage, that we were told that austerity is over. After almost a decade of cuts that have made life difficult for families across the country, I expect that many people welcomed the news coming out of Birmingham and breathed a sigh of relief. No longer would they have to visit food banks after work because they could not afford to eat. No longer would they feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods after 21,000 police officers had been cut. No longer would too many people be left shivering in the cold, unable to afford somewhere to live and with nowhere to turn. No longer would local councillors be worrying about balancing their books, about providing care for vulnerable children, or about ensuring dignity for the elderly people who need the care that their councils should be providing.

Fast-forward to the Budget presented to the House this week, and many people will have been left bitterly disappointed. This is not an end to austerity, but merely more of the same. Two thirds of the welfare benefit cuts
planned by the Government will still happen, and headteachers will still be forced to write begging letters to parents to pay for the basics. No wonder that the “little extras” referred to by the Chancellor—a frankly insulting term to schools at a time when the independent pay review body has said that they do not have the resources to give any pay rises to their staff—were so badly received. Teachers’ pay is down £4,000 in real terms since 2010, and headteachers are writing to parents to ask for donations just to keep services at current levels.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): This Budget has delivered a tax cut for 32 million people. Can the hon. Gentleman clarify Labour’s position, because the shadow Chancellor says that he supports that but the Leader of the Opposition says he does not? What is Labour’s policy?

Andrew Gwynne: As I was speaking about education, the hon. Gentleman must try harder, go to the back of the class and pay attention. Some £1.3 billion of cuts—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: No. Cuts will be hard-wired—

[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I said that we would be fair to everyone and that means Mr Gwynne, too.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, £1.3 billion of cuts next year are hard-wired into the system—[Interruption. ] The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government can shake his head, but the statistics come from the Tory-led Local Government Association. The cuts will devastate councils that are already struggling. Austerity is certainly not over for local government. Councils were the first and perhaps the easiest target of the coalition Government, and they have had to endure some of the largest cuts across the public sector.

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: No, I am going to make some progress.

After all, by cutting funding to councils, Ministers have shifted the blame on to councillors, including Conservative councillors. Councils of all political persuasions and none are now at breaking point. The effects of that on our communities are plain to see across the country. More than 500 children’s centres have shut down and 475 libraries have closed. Support for disabled children has been stripped away—for example, the transport that helped them to get to school to learn like their friends. Support for older people has been slashed, with 1.4 million older people now not getting the necessary help with essential tasks such as washing and dressing. Bus routes have been cut. Our roads are in disrepair, and before the Government laud the £420 million for potholes, I must point out the £1 billion backlog created by this Government’s cuts. Swimming pools, leisure centres and community spaces have closed. Bin collections have been reduced. Youth clubs have closed. Planning departments have been stripped out. Trading standards offices have been slashed, leaving more people at risk of fraud or dodgy goods. Streetlights have been turned off to save money.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): We see the impact of all those cuts in Derbyshire, where elderly people are not receiving care packages, early help for children is being cut and libraries are threatened. Does my hon. Friend agree that the cuts are actually contributing to long-term growth in the numbers of older people in hospital and children being taken into care? The cuts are not only cruel, but a false economy.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because all this does is shunt costs on to other parts of the public sector. That is not a sustainable way of continuing. Sadly, I could give many more examples, yet the Government’s answer to these problems is not to drop the £1.3 billion cut to funding next year, nor to properly address the crises in social care and children’s services, but to offer mere crumbs from the table, which will do little to fix the problem that has been created.

Charlie Elphicke: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman’s speech with great interest, but he has not answered the question put to him by my hon. Friend for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). The shadow Chancellor says that he supports the tax cut and the Leader of the Opposition says that he does not. Where does the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) stand?

Andrew Gwynne: Let me make it very clear. In case the hon. Gentleman has not realised, this is not a Labour Budget. A Labour Budget would look very different. We will not vote today to restrict extra money for the lowest paid in our country, and when we have a Labour Government offering hope for the future, a Labour Budget will rectify the giveaways to the top.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury believes that the Government have not cut local government budgets, but the fact is that, since 2010, spending power—the Government’s preferred measure—has fallen by 28.6%, which includes the 49.1% cut to central Government grants for local authorities. Yes, local authorities have been given new powers to raise funds, but the reality is that a 1% council tax increase in her area raises significantly more than a 1% council tax increase in mine. She can shake her head, but if she does not understand that areas whose properties are predominantly in bands A and B do not raise the same amount as areas with properties in higher council tax bands, perhaps she should not be Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

I will make the position clear, because Treasury Ministers appear to have found these calculations very difficult. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury told “Newsnight”: “We are not making cuts to local authorities. What we have done is give them more revenue raising powers so that decisions can be taken locally.”

I am happy to give Government Front Benchers the calculations provided by the Tory-led Local Government Association and by the National Audit Office. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has gone further and provided an analysis of how the cuts have fallen across the country:
Andrew Gwynne: If Conservative Members really cared about the safety of our citizens, and about the soaring crime in some of our communities, they could have fixed it by stopping the police cuts.

The Budget shows that this is not a Government who are interested in public safety, in our children’s future, in our elderly, in our public sector workers—our doctors, our nurses, our teachers, our police officers, our firefighters—or in the disabled. Indeed, they are not interested in our constituents.

Politics is always a question of priorities, and this Government have clearly got their priorities wrong. Since 2010 they have handed out £110 billion in tax giveaways to the richest and to corporations, but the services on which most people rely have been cut to the bone and to breaking point. In the coming days and weeks—as children’s centres and libraries remain closed, as roads continue to go without repair and as crime continues to rise—people will recognise that the Prime Minister’s promise to end austerity has been broken. In fact, it was a mirage from the start.

We need a fresh approach: a real end to austerity, investment in our communities, and a Government intent on rebuilding Britain for the many, not the few.

Andrew Gwynne (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The police and crime commissioner for Cheshire has written to me to say that austerity is far from over there and that funding pressures mean 250 police officers might be cut from the frontline in that patch alone.
Many political judgments involve taking risks. Very few political judgments and policy judgments give an obvious answer, which is fine. A courageous Minister takes some of those risks, but they do have to be aware of them and to anticipate what they would do if they started to materialise, and I hope my right hon. Friend will be able to do that.

The reasons for my reservations are, simply expressed, that the very welcome news about the tax revenues recently may not last. We have had windfall revenues in the past, and nobody quite understands why we have these windfalls now, so I think a little caution is called for before we start anticipating that they are going to carry on in that way.

As for forecasts, I never spent the money in forecasts, because all economic forecasting, at any time, is extremely fallible and extremely difficult. I do not think I know of a time when it has been more impossible than now. I have only seven minutes, so I am not going to be able to dilate about Mr Trump’s trade wars, problems of Chinese debt, the emerging problems in many emerging markets, the reckless nature of the Italian Government they have elected and, above all, the uncertainty of Brexit, which dominates us. All this makes the task of economic forecasting almost impossible, so we should not spend the money it looks as though we might be getting without having at the back of our minds some idea of what we are going to do if it does not work out.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is right to pour cold water on forecasts. What did he think of the Treasury forecast before the referendum which warned that if we voted for Brexit, there would be an “immediate and profound economic shock”? Mr Clarke: The Treasury took some welcome measures to ease that shock, stepping in with an emergency cut in interest rates and expansionist measures to mitigate the problem. One problem with forecasting is timing. If we get a hard Brexit, I do not think my hon. Friend will be dismissing quite so lightly the forebodings of the Treasury. I agree that some of the leading figures in the remain campaign turned the whole thing into a bit of a farce by talking about Budgets putting up taxes and so on in two or three months’ time, but I did not echo that and nobody else did. Also, it was not as bad as most of the quite dishonest arguments being put forward by the leave campaign about the millions of Turks who were coming here, but I will leave that to one side.

The Brexit deal will have consequences for our immediate economic future. I want a soft Brexit, if we have to leave. I want no new barriers to our trade and investment and no new customs arrangements; I want regulatory convergence and open borders to continue with our major market, but we may not get there—no one knows. I have added in all the other uncertainties in the global economy at the moment. We are all being sustained by an American boom, which may be quite short lived, as these fiscally induced booms usually are. Recession is not impossible in the next two or three years, and we have to make sure, first, that we avoid it and, secondly, that we are prepared for the warning signals when they come.

So I hope I can be persuaded that the Chancellor has retained some firepower in case the economy risks going off, and I hope he will manage expectations. We are all enjoying this Budget, but the key public spending decisions are going to be in the public expenditure round in 2019 and 2020. Nobody should be led to expect that vast sums are necessarily going to be forthcoming then, and we need to manage expectations.

What slightly worried me were what I thought were presentational errors made in the run-up to this Budget. Had I been Chancellor, I would not have agreed that £200 billion for the health service should be announced on an inconsequential date a few months ago and then have been left with the Budget to explain how we pay for it. If we had put the two together, the health service spending would have been the highlight of this Budget, because it is a very welcome and very important decision. The public were braced to pay something towards it. The first reaction is that some other taxpayer should pay, but we could have given ourselves more firepower and maintained our direction on debt by raising some taxes towards it. But they are the only reservations I raise.

Budgets often are popular at first but they are forgotten by Christmas—even mine. What matters is where the economy is in two or three years’ time, and I hope the Chief Secretary will tell me that the Government have not lost sight of that.

1.8 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak for the SNP on the final day of debating the 2018 Budget and to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is always a hard act to follow. I hope I might be able to provide some detail on the caution that he was unable to deal with in the time available to him.

Today, we focus on families and communities. Where better to start in that regard than by detangling the Chancellor’s spun lines on family budgets. Pay growth is continuing to falter. We have had the worst decade of wage growth in 210 years, making it easy for the Chancellor to say that a modest rise in regular pay rates is the highest in 10 years. Even if that level were to be sustained—and that is unlikely unless there is a significant change regarding the UK’s productivity crisis—it is unlikely that pay rates will return to pre-crisis levels until the middle of the next decade. No wonder we have growing rates of in-work poverty. This Government are failing to make work pay.

Just take the announcement on universal credit, by which I am bitterly disappointed. It did not live up to anyone’s expectations. It did not match the ambition set by the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) on work allowances alone. Like me, they wanted work allowances to be fully restored to pre-2015 levels. The Chancellor failed to do that and failed to tackle the other ways in which universal credit is failing utterly. He reinstated just half the cuts to just one part of the cash cow that is universal credit, which the Treasury has milked dry. Indeed, even the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) yesterday welcomed the investment but quickly said that more will need to follow. I agree: very much more will need to follow.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Neil Gray: I will in just a minute. I shall give way only a couple of times as I am conscious of the fact that other Members wish to speak.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that 2.4 million people are to benefit by up to £630 a year from Monday’s changes. That was pure spin. What she should have said is that those families will be up to £630 less worse off. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions herself said that universal credit is costing people £2,500 a year, and the Resolution Foundation said that that figure applies to 3.2 million households. Even if we are to believe the Prime Minister’s figures, for 2.4 million people the income cut from universal credit will be reduced to at least £1,700 a year. The rest of the 3.2 million households will still see a cut of £2,400 a year.

Luke Graham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who welcomed the Chancellor’s move to increase funding and said that it would make universal credit “a tool for tackling poverty” and for easing the burden on low-income families?

Neil Gray: Of course, what the hon. Gentleman does not mention is that before the Budget the Joseph Rowntree Foundation was calling for the work allowances to be fully restored to pre-2015 levels, so I shall take what the hon. Gentleman has to say with a pinch of salt.

That cut of £2,400 a year is before we look at the cuts in other areas of universal credit that will swallow up any gains made from the Chancellor’s announcements on Monday. According to the House of Commons Library, the benefit freeze is going to cost low-income families just short of £5 billion next year alone. That one-year cut via the benefit freeze is worth more than the entire work allowance investment announced by the Chancellor for the next four years, which will be worth £3.8 billion. It is your typical “Tory giving half with one hand and taking back double with the other. It is not an end to austerity; it continues to ingrain austerity. Little wonder, then, that the Government’s own expert adviser on social security, Sir Ian Diamond, has said that the next phase in the universal credit roll-out could push thousands into hardship or even out of the benefits system altogether. For shame!

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, will the Scottish National party support the Lib Dems and vote against the tax cut for those earning more than 50 k? That £1.3 billion could be put into the work allowance to make it back up to what it was before George Osborne slashed it in 2015.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman will see what we do later this evening. He will also see what we do with our reasoned amendment to the Finance Bill, which will be coming next week.

The Resolution Foundation has done a cumulative analysis of all the tax and social security decisions from 2015 to 2023. It shows that the people in the first five income deciles—the five poorest groups of people in the UK—are set to lose out by between £100 and £500 a year, on average and in real terms. Of course, some families will continue to get hammered to an even greater extent, as I have already pointed out. The top income deciles, however, will all see an increase in their incomes. So when the Chancellor chose to bring forward a tax cut that disproportionately benefits higher earners the most—instead of stopping the benefit freeze, which is the single biggest cash grab from low-income families, or stopping the most draconian cut to universal credit, which is the disgusting two-child cap, which targets children with austerity—it was clear that his priorities were skewed. He keeps up an income squeeze on the many to pay for the biggest tax cuts for the few. That might have been a line from the shadow Chancellor, but of course Labour is supporting this disgrace.

The tax shambles that Labour has got itself into was compounded yesterday by Scottish Labour putting out a statement asking the Scottish Government to do the exact opposite of what the Labour Front-Bench team here wants to do on tax. For Scottish Labour, it is the old Groucho Marx line: “Those are my principles and if you don’t like them, well, I have some more in London.” Of course, the Scottish Government are already plotting a different, progressive path on taxation, leaving 70% of all taxpayers paying less this year than in 2017-18. I am confident that that will continue in next week’s budget.

Let me return to the impact that Tory austerity is having on families. The OBR has warned that unsecured debt has risen as a share of household income. In other words, people are relying more on loans and credit cards to stay afloat. We know that from the evidence that the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice have provided about food bank use and people seeking help. The OBR fails just short of saying that the growth outlook is dependent on an unsustainable debt-fuelled increase in consumption, but even its need to mention that in the report should be a warning to the Government and their Front-Bench team. Their squeeze on living standards and family incomes is pushing people into debt, and that has not just social but economic consequences.

Most fundamentally, we should struggle to believe that any of the Budget will be delivered anyway. The OBR has struggled to do its analysis because the Government failed to provide the figures in time. I wonder why that was the case. The Chancellor himself essentially said that his Budget was a wish list—and a wish list that is entirely contingent on Brexit. The OBR’s blue book quotes studies from the Centre for European Reform and the Centre for Economic Policy Research that say that, by the middle of 2018, the UK economy was 2% to 2.5% smaller than it would have been had it not been for the Brexit referendum. In other words, the Brexit referendum itself almost halved the already slow annual economic growth enjoyed by the UK. I doubled checked this with the Library, and UK annual GDP is around £2 trillion, so 2% to 2.5% of that is worth £40 billion to £50 billion. That is £40 billion to £50 billion lost from the UK economy thanks to David Cameron’s failed Brexit gamble and the Vote Leave campaign that broke the rules. The Schadenfreude for the Prime Minister, who claimed that austerity was over, is further compounded by the fact that the estimated cost of ending austerity ranged from £19 billion for the IFS to £31 billion for the Resolution Foundation. Had there been no Brexit, the Chancellor could have ended austerity while staying within his own fiscal rules and still had enough money to fix the roof while the sun was shining.

On Monday, the Chancellor let us all believe that the space he had to loosen the ‘Tories’ vice-like grip on the financial purse strings was down to austerity economics,
Let us have a little look at what the Chancellor did not say on Monday and provide bit of the cautionary detail referred to by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe. Many Tories point to cuts to corporation tax as the reason for greater-than-expected tax receipts. Sadly for them, that does not appear to be the case. Last year, the IFS discussed recent trends in corporation tax receipts and said:

“Weak investment post Brexit is forecast to boost receipts in the short run because it is expected that firms will make less use of tax-deductible capital allowances.”

Analysis in the Financial Times in April last year made basically the same point:

“Companies can offset some of their investments against their profits to reduce their tax bill. The idea is to give them a tax incentive to make more investment. For this reason the OBR has a rule of thumb that a 1 per cent increase in business investment leads to £50m less in tax receipts...But business investment fell by 2 per cent in 2016, according to the ONS. This was good news for the public finances, which received more in corporation tax revenue, despite being bad news for the overall economy.”

David Morris rose—

Neil Gray: I am just about to wind up.

Business investment has continued to slow since 2016. The Office for National Statistics said it was down 0.5% in quarter 1 of this year and down 0.7% in quarter 2. What does the ONS reckon is a factor in that? Business investment is being held back because of Brexit. Of course, business investment is doing rather better in Scotland, with FSB Scotland's quarter 1 2018 report quoting increases in business investment of 1.1% quarter on quarter. Perhaps that is the reason that the Chancellor has held back nearly £16 billion in fiscal headroom and refused to end austerity in this Budget. As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, the Chancellor knows that the fiscal position he has found himself in is neither intentional nor necessarily one to aspire to, because it is at least partially down to weak business investment. More austerity is not the answer. Austerity has failed and continues to fail, and as we know the Chancellor has little intention of ever creating that mythical Budget surplus.

As ever, this Budget is about choices; to govern is to choose after all. The Chancellor chose not to end austerity. Most departmental budgets are set to get hammered in the spending review. The Chancellor chose not to properly fix universal credit. Billions of pounds of cuts to low-income families will continue. The Chancellor chose not to use nearly £16 billion that he had spare; he has presumably squirreled that away as a further Brexit down payment. However, the Chancellor chose to bring forward a multi-billion pound tax cut which will disproportionately benefit those on higher incomes the most.

Now people in Scotland have their chance to choose. Can we really afford to keep ourselves aligned to this austerity-driven Brexit Britain, which is driving up poverty through this Government’s paucity of ambition for our people and isolating us from the rest of the world, or will we choose to regain the powers of independence and the power to choose the future for ourselves?

1.20 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I want to refer to some of the local issues that I hope this Budget can address for my own community, with a particular focus on Putney High Street, Roehampton High Street, Southfields village and, of course, Danebury Avenue, also in Putney. I could make a long speech on my broader views on this Budget, on the need for reform of the Treasury, and on how the OBR forecast has changed so significantly. I could make a speech on the fact that probably one of the biggest challenges in British politics is the seesawing of resources in and out of public services and the resulting inability of those services ever to plan properly for the long term. However, that is probably a speech for another day.

What I want to do today is focus on the issues in my local community. It is fair to say that for most of us, the problem of rent and rates, and the impact that they have not just on local businesses but on local shops, local restaurants and bars is really acute. That is particularly true in London, where the sense is that rent and rates only ever go up during the good times, but when we hit more difficult times my local businesses never see them come down. As a result, we have inflated rateable values that then give a legacy of high rates and rents that feeds forward into the future.

High streets are facing a significant structural challenge as they move from being, historically, transaction centres where people went to buy things to being social centres. What people and communities get out of the high street has significantly changed, and it will not change back. I particularly welcome the initial ideas that the Chancellor set out in relation to a digital sales tax, but I encourage the Treasury to bring those proposals forward sooner rather than later and to properly understand what taxation looks like in the context of the high street when we know that, in the future, high streets will be social centres rather than transaction centres.

I have a business improvement district in Putney. I am sure that the announcement of the future high streets fund—the £675 million that will be available to communities to improve and support high streets—is extremely welcome and necessary. This is not the first time that, locally, we have asked for funds to improve our high street. The council itself is putting in £640,000 of investment to improve Putney High Street, to improve the experience of shoppers and pedestrians, and to improve traffic flow. I have to say that, when we asked City Hall for investment in our local community, our bid was not seen as a high priority. I am delighted that the Government recognise that communities such as mine need investment to support the high street to keep going and make a transition. I ask the Secretary of State, or perhaps the Chief Secretary when she winds up the debate, simply to make sure that they do not make the mistake of giving any of that £675 million to City Hall. If that happened, I can only assume that, yet again, my community would be de-prioritised for investment in our local high streets. Instead, the money should be given directly to local councils to make the decisions that they know are important to improve high streets such as those around Roehampton, Putney and Southfields—the community that I am so proud to represent.

May I also ask the Secretary of State to look at whether that £675 million can be brought forward and invested sooner rather than later so that it can make an impact now, rather than in several years’ time? I have looked at the phasing of the fund, and my personal view is that high streets need support now, not later.
**[Justine Greening]**

I do, of course, welcome the announcement that businesses whose properties have rateable values of £51,000 and lower will see business rates cut by a third. That will help 90% of properties, but, again, I say to the Secretary of State that, for those of us representing communities in London, we will have a disproporionate number of the properties in that final 10%—the businesses that are not covered by that measure. I ask him to continue to look particularly at how businesses in London can continue to thrive. We do not want to be a place where independent shops literally cannot afford to start up and survive. Even some of our high street chains are finding it hard, as we can see with the loss of Marks & Spencer in Putney.

May I also add to the communities part of this debate and say that I very much recognise and welcome the steps that the Government and the Treasury are taking on affordable credit? They are absolutely vital to help a whole generation of often young people, but also people on low incomes, to make sure that they do not pay through the nose for the kind of credit that the rest of us are used to having.

May I ask the Secretary of State to make sure that, at the very least, the Government get out of my way so that I can get my Creditworthiness Assessment Bill through this House with all-party support? Last Friday I came here to try to move my Bill on to its next stage, and it was opposed by an MP and by Government Whips. I ask the Government that, the next time I bring the Bill to the House on 23 November, Government Whips do not object to its being moved forward. It could help 15 million renters across our country get better access to more affordable credit. It is vital that the Bill is passed, as it could have a big impact.

In his opening speech, the Secretary of State set out how we want to support people who have the dream of home ownership, but if they cannot build up a credit history, even with the reliable rental and council tax payments that they make every month, it fundamentally does not allow them to make the case to lenders that they should get the best credit opportunities on offer. It really is time for the Government and the House to pass a Bill that can genuinely make rent count. As someone representing a community where perhaps 50% of households face rent, I can say that this is absolutely crucial to making sure that this is not just a Government who help people to get by, but a Government who help people to get on.

**1.27 pm**

**Edward Miliband** (Doncaster North) (Lab): I am glad to follow the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening). I want to focus on housing, which was where she ended her remarks. In particular, I want to focus on what the Secretary of State said in his opening speech, which is that this is the biggest domestic policy priority for the Government.

We should begin with a moment of candour. If we are looking across the piece at policy failures of Governments of both parties, we can see that this is the biggest single failure over the last generation. I am proud of some of the things that the previous Labour Government did, but we did not build enough homes, and this Government have not done so either.

I am serving on a social housing commission run by Shelter. It comprises residents of Grenfell Tower and people from across the political spectrum, such as Baroness Warsi and Lord O’Neill from the other place, and is precisely designed to try to fashion a new cross-party consensus on these issues.

Reading the Budget, I was encouraged by some of the measures in it. It mentions the broken housing market, to which the Secretary of State also referred today. I must confess that I am old enough to remember when such talk was part of living in a Marxist universe, but it is genuinely good that things have changed. It is a positive step that the Government have lifted the local authority borrowing cap, and indeed that they are providing housing associations with some money to build. They say that their measure on council house building will mean that 10,000 council homes are built each year, and that the housing association measure will lead to 13,000 being built over three years. The question at the heart of any analysis of this Budget on housing is: is that enough? I argue that it is not nearly enough.

Let me provide some context to this. The Secretary of State said that he wanted to be like Macmillan. Indeed, I think all of us can praise what Harold Macmillan’s Government did. Let me tell the House about the scale of building in that era. The 1951 to 1955 Government built an average of 193,000 social homes each and every year. That is more than this Government have built in the last seven years. Each and every year, the 1955 to 1964 Government built 116,000 homes, the 1964 to 1970 Government built 143,000 homes, and the 1970 to 1979 era saw the building of 116,000 homes. We are way off that.

**David Morris**: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the Macmillan era was post-war, when Britain was bombed out and we had the Marshall fund to back us up?

**Edward Miliband**: I will get to the question of funding and whether it is an investment in the future. The figures I have read out are actually flattering to the era since 1979. I am genuinely saying that this a cross-party failure, because under the right to buy we have sold off 2 million homes since 1979—far more than we have built.

The question is, what do we do? My argument is that this is not just about a change in policy. It is actually about a change in the whole philosophy on social housing. I argue that there are three principles that have been in effect since ’79 and need to be replaced. These principles were brought in by the ’79 Government, but have not fundamentally changed.

The first principle is that the market will provide; the market will build. We know from experience, despite the many efforts of different Governments, that the structural barriers in the market such as developers, incentives to build for the high end of the market and the cost of land mean that the market will not provide sufficient housing at the scale and speed required. There is no historical evidence to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the figures show that it is not in the private sector that the failure to build is most pronounced compared with the 1970s; it is actually in the social housing sector.

The thing that we have all missed is that the social housing sector is the bedrock of an effectively functioning housing market. In other words, it does not just benefit
those who live in social homes. It benefits everybody, because it is more likely to keep prices down and avoids some of the problems that we see in the private rented sector. The Government have to be fair and recognise—at least at the level of principle—that saying the market will build will not cut it any more, and that the Government need to play a substantial role when it comes to building.

Mr Betts: My right hon. Friend is making a valuable point. I think it was the last Housing Minister but four—now the Prime Minister’s chief of staff—who accepted that social house building provides continuity to the construction industry, as it does not go up and down with the cycles of the private sector. That is very important for maintaining skills in the industry in the long term.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point.

The second principle is that we need to acknowledge that the Government have come to see social housing as a residual for the neediest in our society, but that was not the origin of social housing. It was a tool to meet the needs of middle and lower-income families. That is particularly relevant today, given that 2016 figures from Shelter show that 78% of private renting households cannot afford to buy, even with Help to Buy. Why should the choice for those families be confined to the often substandard and highly expensive private rented sector? They should have a chance of social housing too. As one of my fellow Shelter commissioners—who happens to be a Conservative—puts it, we need to think again of social housing as meeting aspiration and need. That is a fundamental change, but it was part of the original vision of everyone from Nye Bevan to Harold Macmillan.

The third principle relates to the intervention by the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris)—the question of where we put our money. Essentially, the choice that has been made since Lady Thatcher has been to put money into housing benefit and various subsidies including Help to Buy. What we have again missed is that investing in housing is investing in an essential part of our infrastructure. Dare I say it, it is as much a part of our essential transport—including High Speed 2—or schools and hospitals, and it is value for money because of the return on that investment.

In case hon. Members do not take my word for it, they can listen to Lord Porter, the Conservative chair of the Local Government Association. I have only just discovered Lord Porter—an important discovery. On Monday he proposed that we build not 10,000 but 100,000 social homes a year, saying:

“...The gains are enormous. Investments in social housing could generate returns up to £320bn over 50 years, helping countless families along the way by creating local jobs and building homes people need and can afford.”

“The reason I talk about those principles is that they drive the scale of the response. If we recognise the principles of the limits to the market, who social housing should be for and the fact that there is a return on investment—that to borrow to invest in social housing is a sensible move for the country—we will be led to a much bigger response than we saw in the Budget. As I said, it is good that the Government have changed course in a number of respects, but this is an era for boldness, not incrementalism, and I am afraid that the scale of boldness required is not in the Budget.

I will end by discussing why this really matters. It is actually about Brexit—I am sorry about that. The vote to leave was in part a cry of pain about the loss of hope and the loss of a sense of community. We should not idealise the past, but social housing was absolutely part of that. But this is not just about nostalgia. It is about whether people’s kids and grandkids will have a better life. And here’s the thing: in a world and a country where we seem divided on everything, this issue unites remain voters and leave voters, young people and old people, people in the south and people in the north. Whatever happens with Brexit, we need to bring the country together. I can think of nothing more likely to unite people across the divides than long-term investment in social housing, but it needs to be at scale. Incrementalism is not enough; we need a bolder offer. It is there in our history, from Bevan to Macmillan, and we need a Government who will discover it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

1.37 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). He made an interesting speech, although I think he missed out one aspect that I will touch on.

I want to refer to the macroeconomic situation. The Government’s priority has been to reduce the deficit and to see debt falling as a percentage of GDP—something with which I completely agree and is definitely the right approach. We also have to recognise that the business cycle does exist, and that we are probably closer to the next recession than we are further from the previous one. We need robust finances to deal with and cope with that, as and when it comes. To a certain extent, the problem was in many respects created by the last Labour Government before the great recession when they were borrowing £40 billion a year at a time they should have been running a balanced budget. Had they actually been doing so, we would now be in surplus.

I support and encourage the Government’s aims because strong finances give a strong platform for the future. Indeed, strong finances require a strong economy. Government policy should be directed towards achieving this—it should be an economy for everyone. I will therefore concentrate on two specific things that I believe can help. First, we need to rebalance the economy and the country, which the right hon. Member for Doncaster North did not mention. The second issue is housing, which he did mention. These areas are interlinked as local government can and should play a key role in both.

The reality in our country is that we have a southern-dominated economy, and we have to acknowledge that there is underperformance by the regions to a certain extent. We do not want to diminish the success of the south—far from it, given its benefit to our economy overall—but we have to recognise that there is an underperformance in other parts of the country.
Julian Knight: I think that my hon. Friend is talking about productivity. Does he recognise that if we are to ensure that we have sound public finances in the future and that the debt-to-GDP ratio falls, we will need to increase our nation’s productivity, which means investing in the regions so that we bring up our national wealth?

John Stevenson: I completely agree—the central theme of my speech is exactly that. We have to recognise the success of the south of England and also make sure that other parts of the country are equally successful and drive the productivity goals that we all want.

There is a housing imbalance that we have to acknowledge as well. The south-east and the south are where we find housing pressures regarding demand and price. I shall therefore come on to how we can, I hope, address this, although I have to accept, acknowledge and support the initiatives that the Government have already brought in to help places like Carlisle. Tax cuts; raising the living wage above inflation; a job creation machine that is taking unemployment back to 1970s’ levels—these policies have helped the job security of the people of Carlisle, whose living standards have actually increased.

We have also seen the Government’s northern powerhouse initiatives. I commend the work of the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), who is responsible for the northern powerhouse and takes a very positive and active approach to his role. The city growth deals also benefit various parts of the country. The Government’s borderlands growth initiative has been extremely welcome and well supported right across my region. Indeed, five councils are actively working together and have made a very positive submission to the Government. I look forward to reaching the heads of agreement in the new year and seeing some decent finance going into the region to help to support growth and productivity.

I believe that we can achieve so much more, however. Devolution is a Conservative principle. We want more powers devolved down to the regions—tax-raising powers, but also more responsibility for local government. We should be proactively promoting the unitisation of local government so that we have unitary authorities up and down the country. I am a great supporter of elected mayors. We have had success in that regard in the north of England, and I would like to see it spread right across the whole region. To take Cumbria as a simple example, we have seven councils and 400 councillors for half a million people, which is a completely ridiculous situation that is badly in need of reform. The difficulty is that while everybody in Cumbria recognises the need for reform, they cannot agree on what that reform should be. That is where central Government can help by giving a lead.

I want the Government to start to think more radically. Thinking about education, should we be saying to all schools in the north of England that they should become academies? We need to make sure that skills initiatives are locally based so that they are relevant to the local economy, not necessarily the national economy. The industrial strategy should be beefed up, for example so that we have a far more robust energy policy—again, that is very relevant to Cumbria. Should there not be financial incentives so that people who want to invest look to the regions and the north, rather than always to the south and London? How can we alter capital allowances, the planning laws, VAT, rates and national insurance to incentivise people to invest in the north? Of course, infrastructure spending can improve the economic performance of the regions. In my area, an application has been put in for housing infrastructure funding that would unlock the possibility of 10,000 new homes.

If businesses invest in the north, people will move to the north—they move to where there is economic activity. That would spread wealth and create a more balanced economy. People will move to the north rather than the south, relieving housing pressures down in the south. We will then have a stronger economy that produces better public services and a more balanced country. Government policy has recognised much of this, but I encourage Ministers to be more radical in recognising that local government can be a driver of change and a positive influence. I will certainly support the Government in taking a far more radical approach.

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Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): This is a Government fiddling around the edges when comprehensive reform is needed, and announcing figures with a flourish in the hope that no one will notice that the sums are inadequate.

When the Chancellor spoke of the end of austerity, my constituents across Dulwich and West Norwood wondered what he was talking about. Lambeth Council, one of the councils serving my constituency, has already lost six in every 10 of the pounds it had to spend in Government grant in 2010, but it faces a further £43 million of cuts over the next four years, which is more than it currently spends on recycling, parks, libraries, children’s centres, roads, pavements and community safety combined. Further cuts can only come from services that are already stretched to the limit. When the Chancellor and the Prime Minister speak of ending austerity but make no pledge to reverse the cuts to local government funding, it should not come as a surprise that councillors across the country of all parties, including thousands of Conservative councillors, react with total incredulity and disbelief. The Government have outsourced austerity to local government in an utterly shameful way.

Adult social care services across the country are at breaking point. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has seen evidence of care home and home care providers handing back contracts to councils that they cannot afford to run, and we know that 1.4 million vulnerable people who are in need of care are not receiving any care at all. A lack of social care capacity continues to present huge challenges for the NHS, both in terms of acute hospital admissions and delayed discharge, and to create misery for countless families who are battling to secure the care that their vulnerable loved ones need. Into this system the Government have announced the injection of some short-term funding to address winter pressures, but there is no short-term fix for care homes that have closed. Dealing with that requires months of planning, refurbishment, recruitment and training, which can be delivered only if there is long-term certainty about funding.

The funding for 2019-20 announced this week in the Budget also falls far short of the £2.6 billion that is widely accepted as the funding injection required just to meet current social care needs, and more funding is
required to plan for and meet the expanding care needs of our ageing population. Social care funding needs comprehensive reform if we are to create a system that can look after everyone who needs care with the dignity and compassion that any of us would expect for our loved ones. It is testament to a Government mired in internal division and thinking only of how to avoid short-term defeats that they are not up to the challenge of reforming social care and can only find inadequate, piecemeal, short-term sticking plasters.

Children's services in many local authorities are struggling to fulfil their statutory obligations, still less to proactively support families who may be at risk. There is a crisis of recruitment and retention in children's social work because of the risks involved in working in a system that is stretched to the limit. Yet the Chancellor’s Budget speech did not even mention this vital frontline service. Schools in my constituency are making extraordinarily difficult decisions to cut teaching assistant and teacher posts in order to make inadequate levels of special educational needs and disabilities funding stretch further, and to sustain extra-curricular activities. School staff are going above and beyond every day to sustain the quality of our local schools. On the Friday before half-term, I and many other parents at my youngest daughter’s school were in tears as we said goodbye to a deputy headteacher with more than 20 years’ service who had taken voluntary redundancy because the school could no longer afford her post. When the cuts are striking at the heart of school communities in this way, the Chancellor’s announcement of a pitiful amount of funding for “little extras” is simply insulting.

Last Friday, I joined a police response team in Southwark on their late shift. We spoke of the huge challenges of increased knife and gun crime and gang violence, moped and cycle-enabled robberies, which particularly affect secondary-age children, and increased burglary. Last night there was a double shooting in my constituency. Members of the team told me how their job is being made harder by cuts in police numbers; by the closure of our local magistrates and youth court, which means that they have to travel much further to attend court to give evidence; and by the larger numbers of people in mental health crisis for whom they end up being the first port of call. Yet the Chancellor announced not a penny of extra funding for neighbourhood policing or for the criminal justice system.

Overshadowing the whole Budget is Brexit, which will create chaos for our economy, cause many businesses to grind to a halt, and drastically shrink the tax receipts that we need to fund our public services. This Budget is a cynical attempt to create positive headlines in the midst of Brexit gloom. My constituents see austerity as an attempt to create positive headlines. They have to travel much further to attend court to give evidence; and by the larger numbers of people in mental health crisis for whom they end up being the first port of call. Yet the Chancellor announced not a penny of extra funding for neighbourhood policing or for the criminal justice system.

I turn to the high street, and at this point I have to refer to my interest: I used to be a shopkeeper. Shops have always been sprouting up out of town, and there is a reason for that—the shops in town centres are too small for the capacity of businesses. However, niche businesses do flourish there. This Government have looked at that and lowered the rates so that shops can flourish. Again, that cannot be a bad thing.

This Conservative Government have never let Morecambe down, and this Conservative MP has never let Morecambe down. Things have got better under this Conservative MP than they ever did under the Labour Government, when money was flowing out of the coffers and my town went down the pan. Morecambe is open for business and getting better, and during my tenure we will show what the north-west is made of.
in spending. If we have austerity this year and no increase in spending next year, how can austerity be ending next year? That is a fairly obvious question; perhaps someone on the Government Front Bench can answer it.

Local government has had more spending cuts than any other area of the public sector since 2010. We have a situation where the Local Government Association says there is a £2.5 billion funding gap for social care, and the Government are proposing in this Budget to put £650 million into it, leaving a £2 billion gap. In other words, constituents up and down the country will find more cuts to their social care services next year. That is inevitable.

There are not only problems with social care. Because councils are having to find more and more from their budgets to fund care for the elderly, people with disabilities and looked-after children, they are having to spend less and less on other important services—for example, parks and open spaces, which are really important, or doing food inspections of restaurants and takeaways, which some local authorities have now given up completely. The money for the high street is welcome, but where are the local authority officers who will do the local plans and the regeneration schemes that will put the money to good effect? The challenges of rogue landlords and increasing homelessness require local authority officers. Cuts are being made there, so there will be less money for those services also.

In my city of Sheffield, those national figures translate through. We will probably get an extra £4.6 million for social care on a one-off basis—it will not continue—but the current spending gap in the city’s budget for next year is £35 million. By 2020, the council will continue to have to use reserves on an unsustainable basis. Sheffield is not in as bad a position overall as many Conservative county councils, which are already saying that if something urgently is not done, Northamptonshire will be the first council to go over the cliff edge, and others at some stage will follow. That lesson really ought to be learned by Ministers.

It is not just local authorities that are left with problems in this Budget. Where is the money for schools? I had an email from Simon Smith, the chair of governors at Woodhouse West, which is a primary school in a relatively deprived part of my constituency. He said:

“Year on year reductions in funding, coupled with rising staff costs, are meaning that the school is moving... to submitting a deficit budget this financial year, followed by increasing six figure deficits in future years.”

He draws attention to the fact that the challenges are not just inside schools. More and more parents in that sort of community are coming to the school with problems and difficulties that used to be addressed and helped by other agencies, but those agencies have now also had their funding cut, so parents are relying on the school even more to help them in that situation.

Where is the money for the police? There is not a single penny for our neighbourhood policing. We have excellent neighbourhood policing in my constituency. The two inspectors who have dealt with it over the years—Dave Strugnell and his predecessor, Jason Booth—have been brilliant, but they will say that with only three quarters of the officers they had in 2010, they cannot keep people as safe as they used to. That is the simple reality that we have to face up to and that the police are having to face up to.

I welcome the lifting of the housing revenue account cap. We recently had a conversation in the Communities and Local Government Committee with the Minister for Housing, the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). The challenge for local authorities will not merely to build the 100,000 homes that I hope we will see eventually, but to keep up the standard of homes that the last Labour Government brought in with the decent homes standard and to improve on that standard. Again, the revenue costs of that are nowhere addressed in this Budget.

The Prime Minister promised that austerity was over. The Chancellor said that austerity was coming to an end. The reality for my constituents is that not only has austerity not ended, but the end of austerity is not even in sight.

1.57 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to highlight the measures in the Budget that will be most welcomed by my constituents.

Many of my constituents will be thrilled by the increase in the personal allowance threshold, the higher rate threshold and the national living wage. I never tire of reminding people that I am a low-tax Conservative, and any Budget that gives 32 million people a tax break certainly gets my vote. Despite the mocking of Opposition Members, the funding for potholes is something that many of my constituents have been asking for repeatedly. The damage and cost to vehicles and the environment are enormous, and if they are not fixed soon, that will only decrease road safety and cost the Government and the taxpayer so much more later. It is right that we are spending that money.

Another issue that I must take the opportunity to highlight is crime and policing. My constituents want to see more money spent in this area, because our families and communities want to feel safe. I am glad the Chancellor referenced that in his speech, and I know that residents across Essex will be awaiting a very generous review of the police funding settlement this December.

I strongly welcome the extra £500 million for the housing infrastructure fund, so that councils can deliver 650,000 more homes. I am pleased that Chelmsford City Council is already shortlisted to receive a £5.7 million investment, to help with the Beaulieu station and north-east bypass projects, which are expected to deliver £250 million to the local economy and support more than 3,500 jobs. I pay tribute to the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). We have been working together to promote those schemes, to the mutual benefit of our constituents. I also look forward to helping Uttlesford District Council in its bid for housing capacity funding to help deliver the infrastructure we need to provide for three new garden communities in the coming years.

Last year’s abolition of stamp duty on homes up to £300,000 has led to an 11-year high in the number of first-time buyers, with over 120,000 people being helped by this measure. I welcome the fact that stamp duty is
now also being abolished for first-time buyers of shared ownership, because that was the type of property that helped me on to the housing ladder. I would not have what I have today without having had a shared ownership property, and I am glad that this option is being extended to even more people. I am also glad this will be backdated to cover those who have purchased shared ownership properties since last year’s Budget. I also welcome the fact that Help to Buy is being extended by two years, up to 2023, which will help so many more young people to own their own home. As well as helping people to get on the housing ladder, this change will diversify home ownership. So many of our towns and villages will become retirement homes without an influx of younger people bringing their skills and talents to our area, and these measures are to be welcomed.

This year, like last year, I joined my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) to lobby for fuel duty to be frozen. I congratulate him on his tireless campaigning on this issue, and the Chancellor on agreeing to our request. In the Chancellor’s own words, freezing fuel duty again will have “saved the average car driver £850 and the average van driver over £2,100.”

This is important because it affects not just motorists but their families, and continuing the freeze will help to keep their bills and their overall cost of living low.

Finally, I welcome the digital services tax and the way the Chancellor has chosen to implement it. A constituent who runs an online business visited me at my surgery with concerns about an online sales tax for small business trading. He felt that an online sales tax for small businesses could be very damaging for him and his family, and he was worried that start-ups run by couples from the homes where they live and work would be affected. Small businesses such as PVC Tube Online in Great Dunmow drive our local economies, and their owners face risk and uncertainty to grow their companies and to provide a better tomorrow for their families. I am therefore delighted that this digital services tax will target only the world’s wealthiest companies with global revenues of at least £500 million. The revenues raised will be money available to spend on our public services, so that families across the country can see more investment in their communities. Addressing the huge profits that the biggest companies make through their activity in the UK recognises the changing nature of the digital economy and the issues that accompany that, and this tax is a stepping stone to addressing those issues properly.

This Government are looking to the future and at how we can solve the problems of the 21st century. This is a forward-looking Budget, and I will be voting for it later today.

2.2 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I want to develop a point that was made by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who said that for many people the Budget was actually a pleasant surprise—it has promised them tax cuts and spending increases—but that in doing so the Chancellor is taking a big risk with an economy that is not particularly strong. It is not particularly strong because, as the Treasury forecast shows, the growth rate looking forward is abysmal—it is about 1.5%, which is one of the worst in the developed world—and that is quite apart from the poor growth at the moment.

The growth rate is also based on a fundamentally optimistic assumption. Quite apart from the lag on growth caused by Brexit at the moment, the assumption in the Treasury forecast is that the Government will land a deal, and not just a deal but a good deal, with a smooth transition to a trading arrangement not greatly different from the present. Well, it might happen—pigs might fly—but it is optimistic and, if that expectation is not realised, the economy has very little resilience. We have very high public debt, as the Government acknowledged. The domestic savings ratio is appalling—I think it is the worst in the developed world and is now negative. The corporate sector is heavily leveraged, as Governor Carney pointed out the other day. All of this is reflected in the current account deficit, forecast to be 4% of GDP, which is one of the worst in the developed world. If something goes wrong, there is no longer an inflow of capital and the exchange rate falls; we have had a devaluation of 17% since the referendum and we will have another one.

The main criticism I have of the Budget is that it may have seemed comforting, but the Chancellor did not actually confront the real issue that we have to face: how do we have a mature debate about how to end austerity? That is going to involve people paying more tax, and the issue is how we do it, and how we do it in the fairest and most efficient way. As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has pointed out, we have not really got to the end of austerity, or even to the beginning of the end of it.

For most parts of public spending, there is a continued squeeze. That is true of schools. We did partially protect them under the coalition, but that is no longer happening. Colleges, which are necessary to deliver the Government’s training and apprenticeships, have been cut to pieces. Local government is potentially in an appalling situation. That means a squeeze on social care, which means that the money going to the health service will be wasted because it will have to accommodate lots of elderly people who should be at home. Bankrupt councils, many of them Tory county councils, will be forced to raise council tax, so we will get a tax increase, but it will be a tax increase by stealth, rather than by confronting the matter openly.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On the schools point, does my right hon. Friend agree that the wording the Chancellor used in relation to money for the “little extras” was insulting to teachers, who, day in and day out, find that they have to reach into their own pockets to deliver the basics in schools?

Sir Vince Cable: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am amazed that the Chancellor is not even aware of this. Many mainstream schools have seen cuts in teaching assistants, teachers, curriculums and so on. This will be compounded because there is nothing in the spending envelope that offers any hope that the problem is going to be dealt with.

That leads on to the question about how tax should be raised. The Government have offered tax cuts in the form of lifting the tax threshold for low earners and for middle earners. In principle, lifting the tax threshold is
an attractive policy. I like to think that I was the author of the one we introduced in government. It was strongly resisted by the Conservatives at the time, but they have subsequently adopted it and claimed credit for it. The attraction was not just that poorer people pay less tax, but that the marginal rate of tax is removed when they move out of the welfare system, which encourages work.

In an ideal world, everybody should have a tax cut, but there is an issue about priorities here. Extending the tax cut to the upper threshold is, frankly, something that the country simply cannot afford. At a time when universal credit is being only partially financed following the cuts made by the Osborne Budget three years ago—only about half of that cut has been reinserted—that should be the priority. It is absolutely wrong that priority has been given to lifting the upper tax threshold. Because the two proposals are amalgamated in the Budget statement, I and my Lib Dem colleagues—and, I hope, others—will vote against this.

Beyond that, what this country now needs above all is a mature, grown-up debate about how the end of austerity will be managed. It is going to involve higher taxes for almost everybody—obviously, mostly at the top end, but there is going to have to be a general increase in taxation. I am afraid that the Chancellor’s pretense that we can have our cake and eat it is not realistic. It will rebound on him and on the Government.

2.8 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): The test of any Budget is: does it take us closer to where we want to get to in 10 years’ time? It seems to me that one of the most important things to do over the next few years, and one of the dreams that so many Conservative Members have had for so many years, is the dream of a balanced budget. Once again, this appears to be a little bit like the apple of Tantalus. I am concerned about that because I believe, as the fiscal conservative I have always been, that we need to head towards a balanced budget.

Achieving a balanced budget has been delayed, but I am glad that we are still heading in that direction. The OBR says of the Budget policy decisions:

“Taken together they turn the £3.5 billion surplus…forecast for 2023-24 into a £19.8 billion deficit.”

It also says of the balanced budget objective:

“Had there been no fiscal loosening in the Budget, the objective would have been achieved in 2023-24.”

As it is, achieving that objective by 2025-26, it says, “looks challenging”. That is still an important aim. We must bear in mind that debt interest payments each year are about £52 billion and measures in the Budget will increase those payments by about £1 billion in future years. Opposition Members argue for ever more increases in spending, but I argue that it is better to ensure restraint, continue on our current track and aim for a balanced budget sooner rather than later.

We must also think about the kind of country we want to build. We want to build an enterprise powerhouse and a country that supports enterprise, small businesses and the self-employed. That is why it is important to make things easier for small business people and not to sandbag the self-employed with extra taxes and regulations, instead supporting them and ensuring that their enterprise is backed.

We must be the party of home ownership. Home ownership matters. As I said in an intervention, since about 2001, home ownership among people aged 16 to 34 has halved. We need to increase it. Meanwhile, the number of those renting has gone from about 10% to 20%. We must offer our young people better than a life of renting, and give them the chance to get on the home ownership ladder and build up a stock of wealth in a lower-tax country that ensures that hard work is rewarded.

Giles Watling: Does my hon. Friend recognise that the recent reduction in corporation tax oxymoronically produced more tax in the coffers? It is worth reducing the tax.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is right: if we cut the rate we up the take. We must support small businesses most of all because, since about 2000, small enterprises and businesses have created 4 million new business jobs. Big business has created just 800,000 jobs, so small businesses are the enterprisers and job creators that take our country forward and turbocharge our economy.

If we are to have more public spending, it is important to ensure we have public service reform. We must look at how public services are delivered and ask ourselves whether they can be delivered more efficiently. Are there activities that Government should do more of? Are there activities they should do less of? Why do we not have, alongside the Office for Budget Responsibility, an office of spending responsibility, or even a Budget committee so that the House can consider such matters and press individual Departments to embrace reform and fiscal rectitude?

We also need higher investment. It is all very well having a culture in which we get lots of people with low skills to do low-value-added jobs that lead to no productivity. Why are we not encouraging more investment in more equipment that can be operated by fewer, more highly skilled people who are better paid and drive our productivity forward?

I must take issue with the comments of the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) about how it is all indebted and about the corporate sector—that is absolute rubbish. Some £750 billion on corporate balance sheets has not been spent. There is a conundrum as to why that money is not being invested. We must consider the possibility of time-limited, perhaps very generous, investment allowances to get those corporates to invest in our economy, and to drive the investment and productivity gains that we need.

We need more competition in this country. Why do we put up with Openreach and its appalling service? Why has it not been unbuckled from BT with a strong investment target? Why do we have an oligopoly of banks and of big energy providers, and why have we not taken action on that? We need a bit more trust-busting from the Government and a bit more backing for the consumer interest over the corporate interest.

The Conservative party should be the party of small enterprise and investment. It should be the party that champions the consumer interest and is tough on corporatism and tough on the causes of corporatism.
We also need to be the green and environmental party, which is why in the spending review we need a step change in investment in electric car charging points because it is not good enough. Only when we get that straight will big corporate car fleet buyers start to buy the cars that would then go into the second-hand market, so that this country can have the electric future on our roads that it should have.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues can see, a great number of Members still wish to get in, so after the next speaker I shall reduce the time limit to four minutes.

2.14 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): This is a deeply uncertain time for our politics and economics, and as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said, the challenge for this Budget should be to rebuild Britain and, as the Prime Minister promised, to end austerity. We also need to heal some of the deep divides that face our country, which all of us should care about. Against those challenges this Budget fails, and I will highlight three areas in which that is the case. First, the Government—particularly the Treasury—should be more worried about what will happen to growth in our economy over the next few years. Economic growth of around 1.5% a year over the next few years is far from the 2.5% average long-term growth that we have had for 60 years, and that will have long-term consequences for the wealth that we need for public services, and for our families’ incomes. That growth is also unbalanced. The latest figures show growth of 3% in London, while the north-east economy shrank by 1%. Towns are growing at only two thirds the rate of cities, and many town economies are shrinking. This is not just about needing to invest in our high streets, it is about the jobs and investment we need in towns and communities across the country, in the north as well as in the south, at a time when the focus of major transport capital investment is stuck on Crossrail and High Speed 2 rather than being on the networks that we need around our country.

Secondly, the Budget does not end austerity, and I particularly wish to highlight cuts to policing. The Home Affairs Committee called for urgent increases in investment in policing, but instead, by failing to fund pensions increases and contributions, the Government are cutting funding for policing by about £420 million. That is at a time when recorded crime is up by a third and arrests are down by a quarter. That means that more criminals are getting off, and the consequences of failing to support our police are frankly becoming dangerous, with serious impacts on public safety, community cohesion, criminal justice and confidence in policing, which, once lost, is hard to regain.

The third area I want to highlight is the failure to tackle child poverty and growing divisions across our country, because the Budget gives half the money to the richest 10% of households in the country at a time when the poorest 10% face having their incomes cut. Ten years ago I put child poverty legislation before Parliament, and it enjoyed cross-party support as it aimed not just to halve child poverty but to end it. The Government have ripped up that cross-party consensus.

Tomorrow I will go to a café in Airedale library where councillors and community leaders are putting on free lunches for children. It is half-term, and they realised that some of the kids going to the library were ravenous when they were getting some of the café leftovers. Without free school meals, their parents were unable to put a hot meal on the table, and those children were going hungry. This is 2018, and it should shame us that that is happening in our country.

The Government are going ahead with more than £1 billion in real cuts to tax credits and benefits for the poorest families this coming year, at the same time as choosing to spend a similar amount of money on tax cuts for higher rate taxpayers, including those earning more than £100,000 a year. A lone parent with a four-year-old who works part time could be nearly £3,000 worse off after those changes, whereas high earners will end up more than £1,000 better off. As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, we should support extra help for basic rate taxpayers, whether through the tax system or child benefit, but at a time like this, cutting taxes for higher rate taxpayers is the wrong approach. It means that millions of the lowest-paid workers will not benefit at all because they do not pay enough tax, while millions of the highest-paid workers will benefit the most. Hundreds of pounds are being taken from the parents at Airedale library, while hundreds of pounds are being given to people on £100,000 a year, who have benefited the most. It is simply wrong. The Prime Minister promised to those are “just about managing”;

“When it comes to taxes, we’ll prioritise not the wealthy, but you.”

She has done the opposite. It is wrong. This Budget should be about making us all stronger and the whole country better off. Instead it does the opposite.

2.19 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Budget contains many good measures for families in my constituency. I am grateful to be able to take part in this important debate, and I have listened to much of what has been said. I will try not to add to what has already been said but instead identify issues that have not yet been covered.

Families rightly want to feel secure in their homes, and I have three asks that I think could help. The first relates to the use of existing stock. It is still the case, even in west Cornwall, that many properties are not lived in. They are not second homes or holiday lets; they are literally abandoned. I would like the Department and the Chancellor to consider ways of giving councils the incentive to refurbish them to provide homes for local families and give them security of tenure.

Secondly, just before they lost the election in 2010, the Labour Government introduced the infrastructure levy on house builders. That has had a devastating effect, discouraging builders, particularly small builders, who want to provide housing. For local families, it adds a huge amount of money to the sale of a house. It would therefore be good if the Budget were able to scrap that charge imposed on both house buyers and the sector.

Finally on housing, many of my constituents appreciate the move across to universal credit from the previous set of benefits, but those who struggle to manage their
[Derek Thomas]

budget would prefer their rent to be paid directly to the landlord. Will the Chancellor look at how that could be more easily done when it is in the interests of the tenants themselves?

Families live in communities, and parish and town councils run our local communities. The scraping of business rates on public toilets, which Cornish MPs have fought for since 2015 when I was first elected, will be of enormous benefit to my local parish and town councils. In my constituency alone that measure will be worth £120,000, which can now be spent on local services that will benefit families and other people living in our parish and town council areas. I will play my part in making sure that that legislation goes through.

I have been calling for the rate cut for small businesses for some time, and I am grateful for the positive impact that it will have on towns in my constituency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) covered that issue very well, so I will not say any more about it.

I was disappointed in the Budget in one respect. It is right that families have access to good sporting facilities, so I was hoping to hear something about the stadium for Cornwall. For 10 years in Cornwall, we have worked to try to put together a scheme worthy of Government support. I believe I did everything I could, along with all Cornish MPs and others, to convince the Chancellor to provide the £3 million we need to give us a 6,000-seater stadium or the £5 million to give us a 10,000-seater stadium. Cornwall does not have a centre where sports can be played easily. Part of the proposal is to extend outreach to every corner of the county, improving the health and wellbeing of children and their families. What more can my colleagues and I do, with the people of Cornwall, to convince the Government that the money is needed and deserved, and that the scheme provides value for money? It could be that, among all the other priorities, the stadium for Cornwall slipped the attention of the Chancellor. I am grateful for the opportunity to remind the Treasury team of this worthy cause and look forward to positive guidance on how we can achieve the stadium for Cornwall.

2.23 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): This Budget reflects traditional Tory values that will deepen poverty and inequality and do nothing for struggling families. I will provide three examples: the Government chose to put more money into mending potholes than they granted to our cash-starved schools; they chose to prioritise the motorist over a sustainable future for our planet; and they chose to give away more in tax to those who need it least and ignored those who need most support. Labour should have no truck with that approach. We should pledge to reverse the tax and benefit changes.

Regrettably, most politicians shy away from an honest conversation about the need to raise enough money through tax to fund good-quality public services. We cannot keep promising excellent schools, effective policing and compassionate care if we refuse to raise the necessary money through taxation. We cannot keep pretending that punishing the wealthy is the solution to underfunding. We need to demonstrate value for money. We need a fair system in which big corporations do not get away with paying minimal tax on their profits. We also need a truthful conversation with voters about how much we need to raise in tax to fund public services.

I regret that the Government have not used the Budget to build on Parliament’s determination to have greater transparency in British tax havens, so that we know who owns what and where. Following the money is an essential tool to help ensure that everybody pays their fair share. MPs welcomed the Government’s concession on British overseas territories. However, we must now deal with the anomaly of Britain’s Crown dependencies. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and I visited Guernsey and the Isle of Man and held positive discussions with elected politicians, and we will soon visit Jersey. Our purpose is persuade the Crown dependencies to co-operate with the UK and agree to publish public registers. Should they not co-operate, however, Parliament must use its powers to insist that they do so. Parliament expressed its views on this issue clearly. We must now ensure consistency and transparency in all UK jurisdictions.

Finally, I had hoped to welcome the digital services tax, but the Government’s proposal is little more than a public relations stunt. The Red Book projects that it will be 2022-23 before we raise just £400 million from this tax. A recent Tax Watch report calculated that in 2017, Google, which paid only £49 million in corporation tax, should have contributed £356 million, and that Facebook, which paid only £16 million, should have paid £127.5 million. Just two companies, Google and Facebook, should have paid £480 million in 2017, far exceeding the £400 million the Government estimate they will get some five years down the line from all large digital corporations. Hardware companies such as Apple and Microsoft will not be covered by the tax. Video and audio platforms, such as Netflix and Spotify, will not be caught either. Airbnb and Uber will argue that their marketplaces are not online. Even Google and Facebook will be able to exclude some of their profits.

The tax gives us far too little, far too late. It is an exercise in media management designed to persuade taxpayers that we are all treated equally. It leaves undisturbed the continuing scandal of billions lost to the public purse by the deliberate actions of giant global digital companies. This behaviour is an enduring outrage, and we on the Labour Benches will continue to argue for fair taxation.

2.27 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased to be called to speak in this important debate.

I welcome the Budget very much, especially the cut in business rates, which will have a hugely positive impact on many businesses in my constituency. One such business in Aldershot is the butcher Alf Turner, a long-standing establishment founded in 1956. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that it is not only Budget week, but UK Sausage Week. I am pleased to report that Paul Turner, the proprietor of Alf Turner, is a supreme sausage champion, having won the UK Sausage Week award for best traditional sausage. Last night he said to me: “The cuts to business rates from Monday’s Budget are fantastic news for local family-run businesses like mine. Keeping local shops open can only serve our local communities.”
I draw attention to that because the real point is that Paul’s business is successful not because the Government are helping it, but because the Government are letting it get on with what it does best: making great sausages. It creates a superb product that local people choose to buy and is now available nationally. The lesson is the importance of choice. When freedom of choice is allied with the free flow of capital and labour, and protected by property rights and the rule of law, we have a flourishing free market. That is the great genius of our economy and many economies in the west.

Bim Afolami: Could my hon. Friend illuminate the House by saying what he fears would happen to small businesses such as the ones in Aldershot that he mentioned if they were subject to the programme of huge tax rises and nationalisation proposed by Labour?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. The wholesale economic devastation that would be the consequence of Labour’s nationalisation plan—I do not know whether it has a plan to nationalise sausage production, but I hope not—would be clear. We have to make the case for the free market. In this day and age, it is astonishing that Labour Front Benchers espouse an ideology that totally opposes the free market.

The shadow Chancellor is a self-declared Marxist. The House will know that in 2006 he said: “I’m honest with people. I’m a Marxist”.

He said of the 2008 crash:

“I’ve been waiting for this for a generation”.

In 2017, he stood in front of Communist flags at a May Day parade in London, and just this year he attended the Marx 200 conference in London, at which he claimed:

“Marxism is about the freedom of spirit”.

Eddie Hughes: I understand that Alf Turner served for 20 years in the Royal Army Service Corps—in complete and stark contrast to the shadow Chancellor.

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful for that intervention. Absolutely—it puts those two sets of values into stark and very worrying contrast.

The free market is not an ideology but an inevitable human condition, which Conservative Members rightly espouse. We must call out at every turn the Marxist ideology of Opposition Front Benchers, and we must also reflect that those who had the unpleasant experience of living in countries with the devastating experience of the doctrine of Marxism being applied in reality, such as the Soviet Union, have bitterly regretted it. Shadow Front Benchers and the shadow Chancellor would do very well to read the moving autobiography of Elena Gorokhova, “A Mountain of Crumbs”, which describes the devastating famines of the 1920s and the wholesale shortages of foodstuffs in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, which meant that when she went to the United States, she was simply amazed by the range and variety of foodstuffs on the shelves of the supermarkets there.

Before I conclude, I would be happy to take an intervention from an Opposition Front Bencher if they wish to deny that the shadow Chancellor is a self-declared Marxist. There is no movement from them, so the record will show that they are happy to confirm this depressing fact. We must reject the Marxist ideology of the current Labour party and rejoice in the bright future of the free market that we have in our country, burnished by free choice, a growing economy and the freedom to choose.

2.33 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). I think it would be fair to describe his speech as a bit of a mixed grill, but perhaps I should move on.

In a Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Richmond (York) (Rishi Sunak), talked about local government cuts since 2010. He said that they had been mitigated by what he referred to as “core spending power”, which had gone up by 2% this year and over previous years. He went on to say:

“The idea that the funding formulas do not take account of deprivation or the differing ability of areas to raise council tax is totally erroneous.”—[Official Report, 30 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 332WH.]

Note that he said not just “erroneous”, but “totally erroneous”. I want to spend a moment looking at the veracity of that statement. He must know that the Government’s grant cuts since 2010 have hit those councils with the greatest need the hardest. Knowsley’s cut to “core spending power”, as he puts it, amounts to £485 per person, compared with the average for England as a whole of £188.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Knowsley is one of the most poorly resourced areas in the country. Indeed, it suffers from one of the highest levels of income deprivation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the impact on the streets is dangerous and sickening?

Mr Howarth: I very much agree, and if I have time, I will come on to say more about that.

This is not just about what I or those in local government are saying about why the Under-Secretary’s comments were—I was going to use the word “misleading”—an example of sophistry. Independent analysis from the University of Cambridge says that there are “significant inequalities in cuts to council services across the country, with deprived areas in the north of England and London seeing the biggest drops in local authority spending since 2010.”

As councils all point out, that is because—again I quote from the study—

“These local authorities tend to be more reliant on central government, with lower property values and fewer additional funding sources, as well as less ability to generate revenue through taxes.”

It would not be permissible for me to say too much more about the effect of what the Minister said, but the truth is that it was not a proper portrayal of what is taking place, and his analysis of the grant system was plain wrong.

In the time that remains, let me say a few words about the consequences of this situation in the Liverpool city region, starting with Knowsley. The impact for the people in Knowsley, which has been the hardest hit of all local authorities anywhere, is that we have had our grant cut by £100 million since 2010. Children’s social care needs are rising faster than the resources for dealing
with them, with a £3 million gap currently projected, and the increases announced last week barely scratch the surface of that gap. The same applies to adult care, for which demand is growing, yet the resources are just not there to meet it.

Since 2010 in the Merseyside police force area, we have lost 1,000 police officers. As the chief constable said, the service is reaching breaking point—it is a chief constable saying that. There has been a 14% rise in crime over the last 12 months. Similarly, 50% of the grant for fire and rescue services has been taken away since 2010. The number of firefighters has fallen from 927 to 580. Fire deaths are up by 10%.

The worst aspect of these cuts in services, as the Minister was unwilling to concede on Tuesday, is that the people who can least bear the brunt of them are among some of the poorest in the country. Frankly, what the Government have done to public services in the Budget is shameful.

2.38 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. First, I would like to address the measures in the Budget that relate to the digital economy, including the digital services tax. I declare an interest: I am a former corporate lawyer—I was even more fun when I was doing that. Someone declare an interest: I am a former corporate lawyer. The £675 million future high streets fund because it will benefit to my independent shops and I commend it to the House.

Turning to my constituency, I want to address the measures relating to the high street. We all know that the high street has been under significant pressure over the past few years. Whenever I speak to the owners of small independent shops in both Hitchin and Harpenden, they say that business rates are a significant problem, so I look forward to telling them this weekend about the cut of a third in their business rates, if their rateable value is under £51,000. That measure will be of huge benefit to my independent shops and I commend it to the House.

Even more important than the cut in business rates is the £675 million future high streets fund because it will help to enable our local authorities and local areas to take leadership and act on their own initiative to reshape their high streets to deal with the modern world and its challenges. I urge the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is sitting on the Treasury Bench, to make sure that this money gets to local councils as soon as possible so that we can get on with making improvements.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Budget’s tax cuts will also help the high street by ensuring that regular people have more money in their pockets to spend in high street shops, thereby improving the whole economy?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was coming to tax cuts because, particularly in relation to the high streets, they are a classic piece of positive Conservative economics that will increase demand and help consumer spending, and thereby help the high street. I commend the Chancellor and the Treasury team for putting the policy forward in the Budget.

On tax cuts more broadly, if someone is one of the 1.74 million people who, in only the last two years, the Government have taken out of tax altogether, that side is against them; this side is for them. If someone is one of the 25 million basic rate taxpayers who have saved more than £1,000 in real terms since 2010, that side is against them; this side is for them. If someone has the temerity to want to earn over £50,000—yes, there are people who want to do that—that side is against them; this side is for them. The Budget not only backs the NHS with the biggest cash increase in its history, not only backs the high street and not only backs working people up and down this country, but backs Britain. This party backs Britain; the other side does not.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues have noticed, there have been a number of interventions, which have extended people’s time. When that happens, it prevents others from speaking, and I am afraid that after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

2.43 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this Budget debate and to represent my constituents in Barnsley and right across the Sheffield city region. I am proud to represent these communities, but I have come to learn that it is not in the halls of Westminster or the corridors of Whitehall that decisions on many of the issues that affect our communities should be made. Decisions on important issues, such as our public transport system, on how our schools, colleges and universities work together and on where best to invest in our infrastructure, should, where possible, be made locally.

Through devolution, it should be a collective endeavour between the Westminster national Government, combined mayoral authorities and local authorities across our country to work relentlessly together to prepare our people for the challenges of the 21st century. The world has never been more challenging. It is fraught with risk and complexity, but at the same time it is full of opportunity. Technology now connects the far reaches of the planet in ways unimaginable just a generation ago. In reality, however, this is a country where too many of our communities do not believe their best days are in front of them, where too many believe they are being failed by cuts to their vital public services, and where many of our communities feel as though they are ignored because of where and who they are. That is a tragedy. It is also a waste of the ingenuity and potential of so many people.

Along with many others, I am working to grow our economy and connect our talented people to opportunity. With Brexit on the near horizon, in the Sheffield city region, this work is taking shape, and we are making progress. A story is emerging in south Yorkshire that shows that ours is a region that is resurgent, which is hugely significant because for far too long it has been
an area characterised by the decline of heavy industry. Now, for the first time in a generation, we are witnessing a growth in advanced manufacturing and highly skilled engineering jobs.

It is this spirit of endeavour and innovation that underpins our work to develop a global innovation corridor to connect our businesses, researchers and urban centres and our international airport in Doncaster to create transformational economic growth, but we are doing it with our hands tied behind our backs. We are served by an outdated and antiquated transport network of trains, buses and trams. The north has so much potential, but it needs the Government to realise and unlock that potential. The northern powerhouse offered a framework to do this, but it requires all of the Government to strain every sinew to reduce the inequalities that exist between north and south.

The Government’s commitment to develop new local industrial strategies is welcome, but to tackle the structural inequalities locked into the regions of this great country, we must make structural changes to the way we prioritise investment. In short, actions speak louder than words, and sadly the Budget is yet another missed opportunity.

2.47 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): The Budget of Monday past has been welcomed by many but clearly not by all. I have been asking myself: what will it do for the constituents of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock? It contains a range of measures that will benefit not just my constituents but the whole of Scotland. The Scottish Government will benefit from a funding boost of almost £1 billion. I know my constituents will welcome this increase, and I am sure they will keep a weather eye on how it is spent by the Scottish Government. I hope it will be spent on people projects and not pet projects. Indeed, by 2020 the Scottish Government’s block grant will have grown to over £32 billion before adjustments for tax devolution—a real-terms increase over this spending review period.

Those of my constituents who, like me, enjoy a dram, will very much welcome the freeze on spirit duty. I was pleased to see the concerted efforts of Scottish Conservatives and others recognised by the Chancellor. Indeed, he was listening—I am sorry for doubting him. I know that the industry in Scotland will welcome the freeze.

I also know a few individuals in Ayr, not least Messrs Brown and McLoughlin, who enjoy a wee dram and I am sure that they will raise a glass as a result of the freeze on spirit duty. I am not linking the two measures. I am sure that they will raise a glass as a result of the freeze on spirit duty but clearly not by all. I have been asking myself: what will it do for the constituents of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock?

2.50 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) touched on the need for support for the high street. Here to stay, but I welcome the Chancellor’s recognition of the need for support for the high street.

However, the Budget does not affect those features of universal credit that plunge people into debt, forcing them to get behind with their rent and compelling them to use food banks at the start of their universal credit claim. The biggest of those factors is still the five-week delay between applying for universal credit and being entitled to benefit. Ministers can defend that gap only on the basis of, “It is to ensure that the claimant has enough money to live on while they are waiting for their universal credit to be paid.”

The latest annual survey of hours and earnings shows that almost one in seven employee jobs are paid weekly. On top of that, there are fortnightly-paid jobs. What are those people supposed to do during the five weeks when they are waiting for their universal credit to be paid? I have asked Ministers that question repeatedly, but they simply do not have an answer.

It is extraordinary that it has been proposed to apply the five-week gap to people who are being migrated from existing benefits to universal credit. They do not have a salary cheque in the bank, but have been dependent on benefits, perhaps out of work on ill health grounds, claiming employment and support allowance, for a long time. They will be migrated on to universal credit, and it has been proposed that they too will have a five-week gap when they get no support at all.

The Chancellor announced a two-week run-on for previous benefits. That will not apply to tax credits and, particularly for those on ESA, there will still be a
three-week gap. What are people supposed to do in that time? The Government are saying to them, “We’re changing the system and, as a by-product, you will get no help at all for three weeks.” Where can that idea have come from? How can Conservative Members, who, I am sure, meet—as we all do—people struggling to make ends meet from one payment period to another, have come up with the idea that people get no help for three weeks? Ministers need to address that urgently.

2.53 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Budget is tactically clever and, indeed, wise, but it may be strategically dangerous. That is where I join the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke).

Of course, we all have our own priorities for Government spending. I have campaigned for the Ministry of Defence and I support the measures in the Budget for that. There have been local campaigns on potholes, particularly in a rural county such as Lincolnshire. We have been campaigning for more money for schools, and we all welcome the announcements on that.

However, by 2023-24 the Government will be spending another £30 billion a year. Indeed, by the end of the Parliament the Government will take 38% out of the economy, which is exactly what Gordon Brown took out of the economy at the end of his Chancellorship.

I might be the last Gladstonian Liberal left in this place, or indeed one of the few Thatcherites left in it, but I do believe that the way to deal with the economy and provide for everybody is to try and bring down the deficit and start to repay debt. I want to hear from the Chief Secretary when she sums up the debate that we have not reneged on our promise—the Conservative promise—to start repaying debt, and I would like to know from her when she is going to start doing it.

Whatever we spend, the Labour party will of course always promise to spend more, and I was amused that the shadow Chancellor thinks that the rich now earn just a bit more than he earns. We are never going to set the economy right, particularly in the context of Brexit, unless we fix the roof while the sun shines. We do not want that jibe turned on us; we do not want people to make ends meet from one payment period to another, or indeed one of the few Thatcherites left in it, but I do believe that the way to deal with the economy and provide for everybody is to try and bring down the deficit and start to repay debt. I want to hear from the Chief Secretary when she sums up the debate that we have not reneged on our promise—the Conservative promise—to start repaying debt, and I would like to know from her when she is going to start doing it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: I will not.

We have to ensure that there is competence and efficiency in our public services, so we need a good strong, free enterprise, low tax, deregulated Conservative economy.

2.56 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Tories have a habit of announcing policies that are backed by arguments that, in a sentence, quite often can sound reasonable. However, the minute we scratch beneath the surface we see that every policy is soaked in ideology and backed by mistruths that are unrecognisable in the real world. I want to give a few examples.

We have had umpteen debates in this House explaining in great detail why universal credit is not fit for purpose as it stands. Even this month I have had constituents live off nothing but £70. The Chancellor has announced a boost to the work allowance as an answer to these problems, and he expects credit for that, but, again, if we scratch beneath the surface, we find that this boost only reverses half of the cuts that were made in the 2015 Budget.

Secondly, Tories often say that the best way out of poverty is through work. They preach that they were the Government who introduced a “living wage” and they arrogantly pat themselves on the back for raising it in this Budget. Again, if we scratch beneath the surface we discover they have introduced nothing of the sort. They have slightly increased the minimum wage, which still does not meet the cost of living. No amount of rebranding will make anyone forget that. Further, we see nothing in this Budget to address the age discrimination that is entrenched in the minimum wage structure.

David Linden: In the Budget the Government have managed to increase the minimum wage for apprentices to just £3.90 an hour. Given that that lot on the Conservative Benches will not do anything on this, will my hon. Friend join me in making sure they devolve relevant legislation to Scotland so we can deliver a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay?

Mhairi Black: Funnily enough, I could not agree more, and I have to say as a 24-year-old that I would challenge any Member to justify why I should be paid less than anyone else in this place. If the law does not apply to me, why should it apply to anyone else out there?

My third example is the two-child cap. This is the claim that really sticks in my craw. If it were true that the Chancellor is supporting families, he would not make women prove they were raped in order to get benefits for their children. I see that not many Tories are making me eye contact at the minute. Over 73,000 households are receiving less tax credits than before and the Government’s response was that people on welfare need to just £3.90 an hour. Given that that lot on the Conservative Benches will not do anything on this, will my hon. Friend join me in making sure they devolve relevant legislation to Scotland so we can deliver a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay?

Mhairi Black: Funnily enough, I could not agree more, and I have to say as a 24-year-old that I would challenge any Member to justify why I should be paid less than anyone else in this place. If the law does not apply to me, why should it apply to anyone else out there?

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Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?
Life does not happen like that. There is no telling how or when an individual’s circumstances will change, and this Government know that. It is children who are paying the price.

I want to mention the very people I am sure the Chancellor would love to forget—those WASPI women who refuse to disappear quietly. I have noticed that any time we on these Benches highlight problems such as WASPI or universal credit, we are told to use our shining new powers in the Scottish Parliament to fix them. Let us take universal credit as an example. The Scottish Government listened to the experts who said that fortnightly payments would be much more flexible for claimants. We used the little influence that we have to at least try to make the system slightly better for people. Actually, few people are aware that the Scottish Government have to pay Westminster for the luxury of trying to protect people from the very worst of these policies. So I am afraid that I will take no lectures from the Conservative and Labour parties, which fought tooth and nail to make sure that Scotland did not get the powers required to fix these problems. We were told that employment law and pensions were too important to be devolved and that we were better together, so do not dare to turn around and say that Scottish people should fork out more money to plug holes in policies they did not vote for in the first place.

Let us be clear that this Budget delivers austerity and simply gives it a different name. If this is “better together”, they did not vote for in the first place.

Let us be clear that this Budget delivers austerity and simply gives it a different name. If this is “better together”, then the Scotland I want to live in is, and deserves, better than this.

3.1 pm  

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It looks like our economy is once again defying the naysayers. UK growth has an inexorably upward direction, which is to be encouraged, and debt as a percentage of GDP is down, thanks to the hard work and perseverance of the British people. The deficit is at its lowest level since 2001, and productivity growth has accelerated and is now running ahead of the forecasts made in the spring statement. It is growing at its fastest rate since 2016. In spite of this, however, productivity is still below the average seen in the financial crisis.

We all know that infrastructure is vital to supporting jobs and economic growth and to improving people’s quality of life. That is why I am delighted that this Budget sets aside £28.8 billion for the biggest ever strategic investment in roads, and I want to see our share of that coming to Clacton-on-Sea. This is in addition to the £740 million for the nationwide roll-out of digital infrastructure, which means that by 2021 the Government will be investing £9 billion a year more in infrastructure than they were in 2015. The old saying, “Down good roads wealth flows” still holds true even when those roads are increasingly electronic. While celebrating that achievement, however, I am concerned that there was no new money in the Budget for rail. That is disappointing, because one of the most pressing issues in Clacton is the dreadful rail service there. My constituents want to see a service that is regular, quick and clean.

Let me move on to some of the other issues that the residents of the constituency of Clacton raised with me before the Budget. The introduction of the digital services tax, which I support, has been a prominent issue. As a member of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I know that these huge corporations make massive profits, and it is right that they should pay a fair share for our public services. It is wrong that previous Governments did not get a grip on this.

I thank the Chancellor for the ongoing freeze on beer duty—I am probably not alone in that—but I am somewhat disappointed, having joined my constituents in campaigning for a cut in the duty. I recognise that a freeze is better than an increase, but I will continue to lobby for a reduction, in order to protect pubs as vital community centres.

It should be borne in mind that the pub is part of the great British way of life, and a great place to share and enjoy company. Loneliness is one of the burgeoning issues that we face today, and I would argue that the demise of so many of our treasured village pubs across the country has contributed to this blight. People do not have to drink alcohol when they go to pubs—they can drink anything they like—but they are a place to go to. A problem shared is a problem halved. The pubs in Clacton receive plenty of support from me personally, but one man can only do so much! There is certainly much greater scope for the Government to intervene in this sector.

3.4 pm  

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): After listening to the rosy picture painted by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government when he opened today’s debate, I had to wonder what planet he is living on, because austerity is definitely not over for my constituents and my city. It is not even close to coming to an end. In response to the Budget, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

“If I were a prison governor, a local authority chief executive or a headteacher I would struggle to find much to celebrate. I would be preparing for more difficult years ahead.”

The Prime Minister stood up in Birmingham and made a promise that turned out to be nothing more than hollow rhetoric. For the people of Birmingham, austerity rolls on. Our city has had around £700 million cut from its budget since 2010. In fact, the Government found more money in this Budget for adult social care for the whole country compared with what Birmingham has had cut from its budget since they came to power in 2010. By 2020-21, we will have to find an additional £120 million of cuts to our budget. I do not think that my community of Birmingham, Ladywood has that much left to lose or much more that can be cut. I wonder how we are supposed to keep our city and our corner of British society functioning given the scale of cuts that we have faced. We have seen a total degradation—a decimation—of our public realm, and that has had profound consequences not just for my constituents, but for our country as a whole.

For my constituents, that degradation of the public realm has led to the removal of the things that enable a sense of human flourishing and wellbeing and things that allow a degree of comfort or enjoyment, such as libraries, leisure centres, parks, clean streets, and community and voluntary groups. The disappearance of all those things in Ladywood, which has the highest unemployment rate in the country and all the attendant problems of child poverty that follow, means that community life and individuals’ lives are reduced simply to surviving and enduring. That is unconscionable and immoral.
in one of the richest countries in the world, but it is entirely a result of political choices made by this Government.

The degradation of the public realm also has profound consequences for us as a country. All the things that enable people to come together and form relationships and friendships are part of our shared common life. If that is taken away, we start to tear apart the ties that bind our nation together and, in an era of anger, greater division and rising populism and nationalism all around the world, that choice is profoundly wrong. This is not just about economics; this is about the tearing apart of the things that keep our country together. We need and deserve more than this.

3.7 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): This Budget is good for communities and families in the west midlands. On top of the £250 million that the county has already received from the transforming cities fund, it will get another £72 million to boost prosperity and spread wealth across the region by increasing productivity. Families will also have extra money in their pockets at the end of every single month thanks to the introduction, a full year ahead of schedule, of the changes to income tax thresholds and personal allowances that were promised in our manifesto last year.

In the limited time available, I want to focus on our pubs, which was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling). Despite mentioning pubs, I have not had a drink so far today; that was purely an end-of-the-week brain melt. For too long, British beer and British pubs were seen purely as part of the problem, whereas there is now an increasing recognition of their economic input. Pubs contribute £26 billion to our economy every year, and pubs across the country employ nearly 1 million people, almost half of whom are under 25. As I am sure the Chancellor will be all too aware, the sector generates £13 billion in tax.

However, the sector has been under enormous pressure. The years after Gordon Brown introduced the hated beer duty escalator saw an even higher than trend rate of pub closures and a reduction in the number of people drinking beer in pubs, rather than buying it in supermarkets.

Giles Watling: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Wood: I have only a few seconds.

The measures announced on Monday—a freeze in beer duty and a third off business rates—are expected to help up to 19,000 pubs to be between £3,000 and £8,000 a year better off. The British Beer and Pub Association reckons that will safeguard 3,000 jobs in the sector, which in turn means that more people will be earning an income and paying taxes—this will almost certainly cover the costs. This is a good Budget for beer, a good Budget for pubs and a good Budget for Britain.

3.10 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): At the 2010 general election, the Conservative party promised to eradicate the deficit by 2015. Now the Government have no target for getting rid of the deficit at all. Billions have been cut from our public services over the past eight years, and we still face a budget deficit of £52 billion and a national debt that has nearly doubled since the Conservatives came into government in 2010. The Government have borrowed £670 billion over the past eight years, and my local councils, the Conservative-led Lancashire County Council and Labour’s Preston City Council, are both at breaking point because of cuts.

Turning to the tragedy of universal credit, since June 2018, 71 constituents have written to me expressing the immense problems that many of them are facing due to the transition to universal credit. I will give just one example. Stuart obtained a three-month sick note from his GP due to illness. The jobcentre then started to apply for jobs on his behalf, despite his illness. He then had to wait five weeks before he received his first payment, because of the transition. That is a disgrace, and it is happening to many people across the country who are ill, disabled and, in many cases, destitute.

One of my many local food banks distributed more than 2,000 food parcels in August, up from its normal distribution of more than 1,000 food parcels. I am reliably informed that more than half of those food parcels were given out because of benefits issues, and I am also told that the majority of those issues are because of the transition to universal credit.

The Guardian reports today that my constituency of Preston is the most improved city in the UK, which is welcome. A lot of that is due to the hard work of the public and private sectors, which are working together for the benefit of Prestonians with the encouragement of the city council. However, that has happened in spite of Government policies, not because of them. Many commercial properties in the city centre are unoccupied, derelict and neglected, despite the good work of the business improvement district to stimulate the local economy. Homeless people occupy empty shop doorways, and in the past eight years I have seen a huge increase in the number of people begging on the main street, Fishergate.

This cannot continue. This is still austerity, despite the protestations of the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. It should end now.

3.13 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): This Budget is good news for our United Kingdom, good news for Scotland and good news for Angus, with an extra £950 million for Scotland.

Following tireless campaigning from me and my Scottish Conservative colleagues, I am pleased to see a freeze on spirits duty for the second year running, providing much support for our iconic Scotch whisky industry. It is fantastic news for distilleries around Angus, whether it is Gin Bothy in Glamis, Arbikie vodka or Glencadam distillery in Brechin.

In rural areas such as my constituency, ensuring that motoring is kept affordable is vital, because of the poor transport links. So I was pleased, as chair of the all-party group on fair fuel for UK motorists and UK haulers, to see the Government recognise that and freeze fuel duty for the ninth consecutive year; we have saved our motorists £1,000 since 2010.
Not only have we saved people money at the petrol station, but we have saved taxpayers in their pay packet. By making changes to the personal allowance, we have ensured that basic rate taxpayers have an extra £130 in their pocket, and since 2010 they are £1,200 better off. This Government is working to ensure that those in society who need it the most are able to keep more of their hard-earned money, which, as Conservatives, we know is better in our pocket than spent by the state.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What does the hon. Lady have to say about House of Commons Library figures showing that the Conservatives have cut the Scottish Government budget by 6.9%, when over similar years the Irish Government’s tax revenue rose by 32%?

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it is as false as the SNP Twitter feed, because in fact if we look at the figures, we see a £552 million increase.

As I was saying, it must be noted that the change that the Government are making to the higher rate tax threshold, increasing it from £46,350 to £50,000, is not helping out those in Scotland, because of the SNP-led Government. In Scotland, those earning £50,000 will now pay at least £1,000 more in tax. We are talking here about people working in our health system, in our police and in our higher education system. SNP Members are quick to commend them but then they tax the back off them.

This Budget was welcome news also because of the £150 million ploughed into the Tay cities deal, which will benefit my constituency. It shows exactly what the Scottish people want to see: Scotland’s two Governments working together for the better of our country. I also welcome the funding going into our fishing industry. Only Scottish Conservatives are standing up for that industry; an extra £10 million is going into the technology and methodology fund. SNP Members want to drag our fishermen right back into the hated common fisheries policy.

There is nothing in this Budget that those SNP Members would have agreed to, and nothing that the Chancellor could have offered in this Budget would have allowed them to vote for it. I very much hope that when they troop through the Lobby they know that they are voting against a tax break for the hard-working, against a fuel duty freeze, against a spirit duty freeze, against £130 million going into the Tay cities region, against NHS funding and against extra funding for universal credit. They should put their constituents before their party.

3.17 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Just two weeks ago, a group of Ministers sat on the Treasury Bench and launched the Government’s cross-departmental loneliness strategy. They were right to do that, because, as the Prime Minister says, this major public health issue has as big an impact as obesity or smoking, and affects up to one in five adults often or always. As part of that strategy, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), promised that we could look forward to a loneliness test in respect of major decisions in future. Disappointingly, there is not one with this Budget. So I thought I would do the job for the Government and review its impact on loneliness to see whether the fine rhetoric we heard in this Chamber two weeks ago has been followed up with action.

The loneliness Minister, speaking with refreshing honesty, admitted that past cuts had “inadvertently” made loneliness worse—here is how: Since 2010, Government funding cuts have led to the closure of 428 day centres, 1,000 children’s centres, 600 youth centres and 478 public libraries. Those are all spaces where people can go and loneliness can be tackled. Government funding cuts have also led to the loss and closure of lunch clubs and befriending services; the loss of funding for voluntary and community groups and for community centres; and care visits being shortened in time and reduced in number, and being denied to 1.4 million older people. Again, those are all services that help to tackle and prevent loneliness. So has all that come to an end in this Budget, now that we have a loneliness strategy? Sadly, I do not think it has, because according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, over the next three years we can look forward to an average cut of 3.1% each year in the local government funding from which all those services are funded. There is no end to austerity there.

While Ministers have been trumpeting £650 million extra for social care, they have neglected to point out that the previously announced £1.3 billion cut is still going ahead. Rather than more money for social care, then, we are looking forward to another £650 million cut in services.

In my borough, Croydon, we have a very high number of children seeking asylum. The Government’s severe underfunding of asylum services means that the support that those children need does not even exist yet. Isolation is of course a major problem for a child living in a country without their family or members of their social network. Even among that group, loneliness is going to get much worse.

Despite the fine words in the loneliness strategy launched just two weeks ago, the Budget will result in more and deeper cuts to all the services that tackle or prevent loneliness. I have to ask: what is the point of a cross-departmental group of Ministers sitting on the Front Bench to trumpet their new loneliness strategy if the Chancellor comes along and trashes it with his Budget just two weeks later? No wonder the Government dare not apply a loneliness test to the Budget—it is a test they would fail.

3.21 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The oil and gas industry, not just in Scotland but across the length and breadth of our United Kingdom, employs hundreds of thousands of people, providing skilled jobs and contributing not only to our economy but to our nation’s energy security. The Conservative Government have already taken unprecedented action to support this crucial industry, with tax breaks for the North sea worth more than £2 billion. We now have one of the most competitive tax regimes in the world. There is an awful lot of life left in the North sea: according to a University of Aberdeen report, there are potentially 17 billion barrels equivalent of oil to extract. To maximise the North sea’s full potential, ongoing support will be required to sustain this vital industry and the thousands of jobs that depend on it.
Scottish Conservative MPs have raised the industry’s profile at the highest levels of Government. Recently, I was pleased to welcome my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to my constituency, where we met representatives from Oil & Gas UK and visited Aberdeen harbour, where the Minister was given a fascinating insight into the level of activity at the port. Thanks to UK Government funding through the Aberdeen city region deal, the harbour expansion is progressing well. This is an exciting time for the harbour, and its expansion is a clear signal that Aberdeen is open for business. It opens up huge opportunities for oil and gas decommissioning, as well as for welcoming new cruise ships to our city.

Alongside my Scottish Conservative colleagues, I have been lobbying the Chancellor and the Treasury at every opportunity, so I am delighted that the Chancellor announced in his Budget statement that he will keep the headline tax rate in the North sea at its current level, despite the oil price rising. That will ensure the highest level of support for the sector by the UK Government, which is great news for jobs, for families, for the economy and for the communities of the north-east of Scotland. As the industry emerges from the worst downturn in its history, the Budget is a vote of confidence in Aberdeen and the North sea, which is why I commend it to the House.

3.27 pm
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Before I come to my main speech, I wish to refer to some comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) about Marxism and sausages. During my hon. Friend’s speech, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), of whom I am perpetually fond, shouted from a sedentary position, “How were the sausages in Soviet Russia?” Let me tell him that they were awful—awful. They were so bad that they were made with wood chipping. It was said that the people of Soviet Russia preferred to eat sausages that had gone off because they at least knew that they had been edible at some point. That was what Marxism did to the sausage; that was what Marxism did to the people of Russia.

The truth is that it is the free market that brings prosperity to us all. There was much in this Budget to encourage and help the free market on which the prosperity of my constituency is based. We are a constituency in Essex that is built on the hard work of small and medium-sized enterprises, which will benefit greatly from measures to help entrepreneurs, the reduction of business rates by a third, and the new fund to help our high streets. This is hugely appreciated by the hard-working people of my constituency.

The Chancellor also announced some very good news that we have perhaps become too acclimatised to in this House. Employment in this country is at record levels. The actions of this Government since 2010 have enabled more people to go to work and earn more money so that they can support their families, pay their taxes, and help their communities and public services to thrive. That is something of which we should be proud. The work of this Government will see the deficit reduce from over 10% to—in 2023-24—less than 1%.

Debt as a proportion of GDP is falling. One of the things that we should care about most is the legacy that we leave in the long term. When I was born, the debt-to-GDP ratio was about 35%. When the Labour party took power, it was slightly higher. By the time Labour left office, it had more than doubled. If this generation cannot reduce that figure, we are simply piling burdens on to our children and our grandchildren.
3.30 pm

**Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that his Budget was for the strivers, the grafters and the carers. As I listened to his words I thought, “This isn’t a Budget for the striving, grafting and caring women I have known in my life.” This is not a Budget for the women who make up 77% of the NHS workforce—the cooks, cleaners, nurses, midwives and doctors who struggle every day to keep the NHS running. Nor is it a Budget for the 1 million hard-working women stuck on chronically low pay whom I represented at Unison, who worry that their jobs are now insecure as zero-hours contract work increases. It certainly is not a Budget for the hard-pressed women of Wolverhampton, who come to my office with their concerns and problems, desperate for help because of eight years of austerity.

Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer realise that 87% of the impact of Government tax and benefit changes since 2010 has fallen on the shoulders of women? It is women who are most affected by austerity and whose lives are made ever harder by the Tory cuts forced on councils? It is women, along with their children, who continue to bear the brunt of this Government’s austerity. There was no mention in the Budget of the scandal that 33% of 12 million British children now live in poverty. One million of these children are in working households, and 120,000 children are officially homeless and living in temporary accommodation.

The women of this country will not be impressed by the money that the Chancellor is giving schools for “little extras”—£10,000 for junior schools and £50,000 for secondary schools, which have had an 8% cut in real-term funding and now cannot cover many basic expenses. Some 18,000 schools now face funding cuts. There was nothing in the Budget for further education colleges, where women can access an education that could give them a second chance in life. This part of our education provision is now crumbling due to the Government’s lack of support.

Finally, let me turn to the WASPI women who protested at Monday’s Budget from the Gallery—a generation of women made worse off by the former Chancellor. These women thought that they could retire after a lifetime of work but were not given any notice that equality with men meant taking money away from women. One hundred years after women won the right to vote, this Government’s lack of support and living in temporary accommodation.

Whatever the Prime Minister or the Chancellor of the Exchequer say, austerity is not over, nor is it coming to an end. Austerity will end only when we have a Labour Government.

3.32 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am delighted to support this Budget, which delivers for my constituents in the Scottish borders and all people across Scotland.

Scotland is lucky enough to have two Governments, but their economic records could not be so far apart. Others have spoken very well about what the UK Government are delivering for Scotland, and I want to focus my remarks on how the Scottish Government are failing to deliver for Scotland. The Scottish Government are completely failing to use their vast array of powers to grow the economy north of the border. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) tried to put a glossy shine on the Scottish Government’s economic record, but I am going to set out some facts to the House.

Last year, the Scottish economy grew at less than three-quarters of the rate of the United Kingdom’s economy. By 2022, the Scottish economy will be over £18 billion smaller as a result of the low growth under the SNP Scottish Government, and Scotland has had the slowest business growth of any country or region in the United Kingdom since 2016. Shamefully, there are now fewer businesses in my constituency than there were in 2015, and the blame for that lies squarely at the door of the nationalist Government in Edinburgh, with their anti-business policies and obsession with raising taxes, as well as the uncertainty that exists in every part of Scotland over the threat of another independence referendum, which Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, refuses to take off the table. Scotland now has the highest business rates in Europe, and everyone earning over £26,000 is paying more tax than they would in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I understand that SNP Members are planning to vote against the Budget today, so let me remind the people of Scotland just what SNP Members are voting against. They are voting against a tax cut for over 2.4 million Scots; against a pay rise for 117,000 hard-working Scots on the national living wage; against freezing fuel duty for Scottish motorists and businesses; against a £200 million boost to the whisky industry secured by Scottish Conservative MPs; and against a commitment to growth deals, including the borderlands growth deal. SNP Members like to pretend they are standing up for Scotland. The Scottish Government like to pretend they are standing up for Scotland. The only people standing up for Scotland are the Scottish Conservatives in this House.
household poverty. If it were not for food banks, charities and council interventions, especially during school holidays, many of our kids would go hungry.

As for local government, the Chancellor has seemingly put extra funding into adult and children’s services and social care but, in all honesty, he continues to choke the life out of our councils and public services. This Budget does nothing to end austerity, and by promising jam tomorrow, the Chancellor only perpetuates it. There is no money for policing and no money for further education. My constituents are dogged, determined, and deserve a damn sight better.

3.38 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I rise to support this Budget—a Budget that allows our country to say with confidence, after staring into the economic abyss 10 years ago, that our best days lie ahead.

We are talking today about families and communities. In that vein, before drilling into the specific measures in the Budget, it is helpful to take stock of how far we have come in respect of jobs. Why is that? It is because there are some in this House who are in danger of forgetting what unemployment means for families and communities. It means misery, lack of self-esteem and wasted potential. It means hollowed-out communities and a grinding, corrosive sense of despair. Unemployment in our country is just 4%. In Cheltenham, it is under 2%. Yet in France it is 9% and in the eurozone it is 8%. In April 2010, there were 2.5 million unemployed people in our country, over 900,000 aged between 16 and 24, with a lack of opportunity and a lack of life chances. This country is turning that around.

There is no true economic strength without fairness too. It was the right decision in the Budget to raise the national living wage, which will go up by nearly 5% to £8.21 per hour. That will deliver an extra £690 to a full-time worker, while ensuring that businesses can thrive and expand. Raising the personal allowance one year early to £12,500 will save a typical basic rate taxpayer £130.

Stronger families mean healthier families. We should be in no doubt about the steps that this Government have taken to invest in the NHS. The figures are stark, and they are so great that it is sometimes hard to take them in. Some £122 billion is spent annually today, but by 2023 that figure will go up to £149 billion—the largest peacetime investment in history. In Cheltenham, that is over and above the £39 million capital investment in Gloucestershire’s hospitals.

Stronger families need good housing too. That is why I welcome the measures in the Budget to help turn derelict retail outlets into homes. Before carving up the countryside, we should look to meet as much of our housing need as possible from brownfield sites. We can consolidate our shopping districts, rebalance our town centres and make them vibrant and prosperous.

On education, there is more to say and much I want to discuss. At the comprehensive spending review, we need to look at how we can support those with the greatest needs. But overall, the careful stewardship of this economy and the hard work of the British people mean that tough decisions have been made—the right ones—and the future for our country is bright.

3.41 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The thing that struck me while listening to the Chancellor on Monday and to Government Members today is the yawning chasm that exists between the picture they paint and the reality for my constituents—the people who come to my office for help day in, day out. The reality of their lives is illustrated as well as anything else by the numbers who are currently turning to food banks.

Several food banks serve my constituency. The biggest, the B30 food bank, is run by the Trussell Trust. It distributed 7,501 emergency food parcels in the last year, which is up by a third from the year before. This is a picture that led the Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Rev. David Urquhart, to comment two months ago:

“In one of the richest countries in the world, it is a scandal that people go to bed hungry and families have to choose between eating and heating.”

That is the reality of too many people living in Birmingham today.

Around a third of the people who come to the food bank are in work, but their incomes mean that they cannot make ends meet. In work, on a low income or out of work, 54% have had to turn to the food bank because of delays and changes in benefits—yes, this is an area where universal credit is live. I want to echo the powerful points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). He talked about not only the problems with the delays built into the universal credit system, but the way that the system interacts—or rather, does not interact—with legacy benefits, which means that more and more people are coming off legacy benefits, with their claims cancelled, and yet are not receiving any support under universal credit for weeks. That spirals them into debt, and the consequence of that can be seen in the figures for those using food banks.

In the short time I have left, I want to say one further thing. It is not just a failure to fund public services that is the problem; it is the fact that the advice and support that have been there in the past from the statutory sector and the voluntary sector for people in need are simply not there any more. Without that lifeline, what could be a problem is becoming a crisis for too many families in this country. That is why I appeal to the Chancellor and those on the Treasury Bench that if they really want to bring austerity to an end, they need not just to fund our public services properly—important though that is—but to ensure that they fund the advice and support mechanisms in our voluntary sector and our statutory sector, so that people get the support they deserve.

3.44 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): This is a Budget that delivers: it delivers for the country, for the people of West Oxfordshire and, most importantly, for the communities and families living in West Oxfordshire. I mention those communities and families simply because those people will judge the success or failure of this
Budget or any other Budget not on the GDP figures or the facts in the Red Book, but on their actual lived experience and the difference the Budget makes to their lives.

When we look at the background this Government has managed to create and the foundations that this Budget lays, we see that they are very promising. We have employment at the highest level since 1975, with 3.3 million more jobs since 2010 and unemployment falling by a third. There are record numbers of new businesses, which means more jobs and more wages, with all of the hope and the promise that they bring. We also see borrowing at its lowest level for 20 years and the national debt falling. This is all underpinned by the favourable business and taxation policies that this Government have made possible.

When we look forward to the future, we must look at an economy and a Budget that will increase growth. In the future, as we leave the European Union, the decisions we take will be in our hands, and the decisions we take here will govern the success or otherwise of this country in the future. Because we will be responsible for our own decisions, we can have great hope in looking ahead—hope that we will have higher wages, more cash in families’ pockets and more money for the public services we all value so much.

Housing and homes are a major issue, and I will dwell on them very quickly, if I may. The stamp duty cut has already raised the threshold to £300,000, which has helped 121,500 more people to get the homes they want and to get themselves on the housing ladder. I welcome the measures in this Budget that will extend that to shared ownership for properties up to £300,000, which will get even more people on the housing ladder. I would like to go further and have more reforms of stamp duty to ensure that people can downsize if they so wish, and to untie the housing market so that people can move and have the homes they want so much.

I wish that I had longer than three minutes to expound on the good things in this Budget. There is so much good stuff—[Interruption.] I am glad to see that everybody on the Labour Benches agrees. Ultimately, there is a choice: between the jobs and the work that this Government are offering and mortgaging our children’s future with a trillion pounds of debt, as the Labour party is offering. There is so much uncertainty ahead, and we can expect little from the Labour party.

I welcome this Budget.

3.47 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) has already pointed out that the environment rated no mention at all from the Chancellor. I would add that, as ever, Wales remains an afterthought, and it was hardly mentioned in the Budget. Our planned transformative and green infrastructure projects—rail electrification, opening old lines, and tidal power generation—have all been swept away, while the entire Welsh Government roads budget has been blown on a 12-mile stretch of motorway through the precious Gwent levels. The word “austerity” may have been scratched out of the Prime Minister’s dictionary, but the people of Wales will be feeling its impact for years to come, and over everything looms the cloud of Brexit.

The figures are hugely worrying. In 2016, gross value added per head in Wales was 72.7% of the UK figure—in fact, the lowest figure in the UK—and between 2014 and 2017 the proportion of people on relative low income was highest in Wales, at 20%, while the lowest figure was in the south-east of England, at 12%. Above all, the fact that over a third of our children in Wales are living in poverty is continuing national disgrace. The gross disposable household income per head in Wales was £15,835 in 2016, which was 81.5% of the UK average. Between 1999 and 2016, Wales had the third lowest percentage increase in gross disposable household income per head of all the UK countries and regions—in other words, we are falling behind.

Universal credit is only partly in force in Wales, at 11% of potential claimants. I note, however, that it has not been rolled out in the most intensely Welsh-speaking areas, such as my own. In fact, the wonderful universal credit system just cannot cope with treating our two languages equally. According to Community Housing Cymru, tenants on the new system owe more than £2 million in unpaid rents, even though a quarter of those now in arrears were managing to keep up with their rents before they were transferred to universal credit. Changes to personal allowances have already been discussed. The Welsh economy is badly skewed towards the low-wage sector, so the Chancellor’s kindly treatment of higher rate tax payers will have a more limited effect on incomes in Wales, and will potentially have a huge effect on the Welsh Government’s new tax-raising powers. Given the gross national and regional disparities and inequalities in Wales and the UK there is much uncertainty ahead, and we can expect little from this Budget and this Government.

3.50 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): As you return to your Chair, Mr Speaker, I return to the 1950s. There has been a lot of talk about austerity, but when our historians speak about austerity they focus not on public spending but on living standards and wages. In 1950, we spoke about the fact that there was rationing and people had low disposable incomes—we did not focus only on levels of public spending. Indeed, in 1950 we spent 6% of GDP on defence. The point is what is happening. The Chancellor was able to deploy comes from the fact that the OBR has revised employment figures up for this country. That is not a magic money tree—that is literally the hard work of the British people paying off, and more tax revenue coming in to support higher spending.

Just before the Budget we heard the fantastic news that this country is now experiencing its fastest wage growth for almost a decade. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) chunts, but if she reads coverage of those wage statistics in The Guardian, she will see they have been analysed to see why that is happening. The conclusion is that it is due to competition between firms for workers—in other words, wage growth is coming from the unemployment miracle that we are delivering. Indeed, in the Budget the extra money that the Chancellor was able to deploy comes from the fact that the OBR has revised employment figures up for this country. That is not a magic money tree—that is literally the hard work of the British people paying off, and more tax revenue coming in to support higher spending.

In a country which, compared with other similar northern European countries, has not had as high an average GDP per head as it could have had, what can we do to sustain those higher wages in the years to come so that we can in turn sustain higher public spending in the only way possible? The answer is competitive taxes, so that we do not eat up into people’s take-home pay, we have sensible levels of public spending, and above all, we keep borrowing and debt under control.
[James Cartlidge]

If we followed the Labour party we would decimate that growth in wages because taxes would surge, eating into take-home pay. Investment would fall as businesses would be less confident if faced with a return to '70s-era socialism. Above all, my biggest problem with what Labour Members offer with their increase in debt is that if they push up public spending as they promise, yes, public spending austerity will fade briefly, but it will return as we go from feast to famine, as we have done so many times before through boom and bust. What will happen to austerity? It will be forced on the next generation with higher debt. That is a gutless and cowardly approach to public finances. The right approach is sensible, prudent, conservative economics, based on markets and a sensible balance between low taxes and targeted public expenditure on priorities such as the NHS, and that is why I will be voting for the Budget tonight.

3.53 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I speak as co-chair of the cross-party drugs, alcohol and justice group, and as a member of the all-party group on alcohol harm. With dozens of alcohol-related deaths across the UK every day, those two groups decided that, rather than wait ages for the Government’s alcohol strategy, we would launch our own alcohol charter that advocates achievable steps to improve support for those in need, protect public health, and cut crime and disorder. It has the support of 30 relevant organisations, and I urge hon. Members to add their support by signing early-day motion 1682.

Despite the Chancellor’s claims of record funding for the NHS, I was disappointed that he failed to take the opportunity in the Budget to reduce alcohol harm. Instead, it seemed that he had been wooed by pre-Budget pleas for him to cut beer duty, such as the claims plastered on Westminster tube station that such a measure would protect our pubs. Cuts in duty do not benefit pubs because supermarkets continue to undercut pub prices, and big brewers retain the savings. We do not protect people or pubs by allowing supermarkets to sell alcohol more cheaply than water for vulnerable people to drink at home alone or on our streets.

Colin Shevills of Balance North East highlighted the fact that cheap alcohol places a huge burden on our communities, the NHS and our public services in our north-east. He also referred to the findings in a survey by north-east pub landlords, which found that cheap supermarket alcohol, rather than alcohol taxes, is the main reason to blame for the closure of our local pubs. He also referred to the findings in a survey by north-east pub landlords, which found that cheap supermarket alcohol, rather than alcohol taxes, is the main reason to blame for the closure of our local pubs.

3.56 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I rise to support the Budget. I will start with two points on the criticism and rebuttals we have received from the SNP.

First, universal credit has received a lot of criticism. I think every single Member knows that there are improvements to be made to universal credit. That is what the Budget does. It allocates more money to universal credit. It puts the SNP at odds with the chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust, who both recognise the improvements to universal credit, which will help to tackle poverty more effectively.

Secondly, on tax, where the SNP tax changes delivered £20 a year for the most vulnerable, a pathetic 38p a week, our Budget delivers £130 a year, which is £1,200 for the basic rate income taxpayer, helping people who need it most.

The SNP talks about having a different path and attracting more people to Scotland, but here is the interesting thing. They want to bring more people in. I will give them a hint about how to do that: do not tax our doctors, our teachers and our servicemen and servicewomen more than everywhere else in the United Kingdom.

What does the Budget deliver for Scotland and for Ochil and South Perthshire? It gives £950 million extra for the block grant, which is a real and cash increase. It delivers a spirits freeze, which helps companies in Menstrie, Madderty and Kinross in my constituency. It delivers £550 million more for the NHS, which even the SNP recognises is a positive thing and, if devolution works correctly, there will be £43 million more for business rate relief to help our high streets in Crieff and Alloa, £41 million to improve roads across Perth and Kinross and Clackmannanshire, and £87 million more for social care. Those are positive steps in the Budget, and that is before I even mention the £150 million of new money that is being allocated in the Tay cities deal. The Budget will also deliver a crackdown on tax avoidance, including VAT, and measures on the hidden economy and on offshore tax compliance.

Some of the smaller measures in the Budget have been lost. It expands the operations of the British Business Bank in Scotland by allocating personnel on the ground to help our businesses to access more patient capital. In addition, it allocates £1.6 billion to strengthen science innovation, with £235 million for quantum technologies and £20 million for fusion power, which is a subject very close to my heart.

We on the Government Benches want to empower people. We do not want to tie them to dependency. The Budget provides more support for the most vulnerable and more opportunity for all. That is why I support it in this House.

3.59 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): A lot of Opposition Members have talked about how austerity is not over and about how the Government’s rhetoric on that is empty. I would say something different: how can the Government claim that austerity is over, is coming to an end or whatever it is they are saying, when they do not even know what it is? After the Prime Minister told us
that austerity is over, I asked the Chancellor what his Department’s definition of austerity is and how his Department measures austerity. I was keen to ensure that he was retaining nothing to halt his Government’s devastating cuts to public services, but to their huge social security cuts, which must be ended and reversed if austerity is really to be ended. The reply from the Treasury simply stated:

“The Chancellor will set out the government's plans for the economy and public finances in detail at Budget.”

But he did not explain what austerity is. Far from clarifying what it is, he did very little to back up the Government’s empty words on ending it. So if they cannot even define what they mean by austerity, let alone make any significant steps towards ending it, that is just further proof that the Budget is empty rhetoric.

However, let me tell the Government what austerity means to my constituents in Midlothian. For young workers, austerity from this Government and the Scottish Government is going to mean further decimation of their services. Yes, the Government recently made small increases to the national living wage, but it is not a real living wage. Pay for 16 and 17-year-olds is being raised from £4.20 to £4.35, yet they are still doing the same job as people who are older than them and getting paid much less for it.

If paid employment is to provide a reliable route out of poverty for women in my constituency, action must be taken to address the continued gender inequalities in the labour market. Nothing from the Chancellor in his Budget was aimed specifically at improving the position of women in the economy. We had the WASPI campaigners in here because they were completely overlooked. I am fed up of listening to the Scottish Conservatives today, who have gone on and on about their representations to the Treasury and their standing up for Scotland, when they have done absolutely nothing about split payments, which I have raised time and again. It is an absolute disgrace.

I will not be supporting a Budget that does nothing to tackle the urgent issues of climate change and homelessness, has nothing for the WASPI women, youth services or the decimated women’s services, and does nothing to tackle period poverty.

4.1 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called early in the debate, Mr Speaker—or at least a little earlier than I thought I might be called. The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who is no longer in his place, seemed to have a bit of a downer on optimism. As I feel powered by optimism, I felt affronted by that idea. In the west midlands, we voted for Brexit because we are completely optimistic about what the future will hold for us, and I completely endorse the Budget, because it puts us on a great footing to make the most of those opportunities when we leave the European Union.

One thing about Conservatives is that they invariably poll high in people’s consideration of who is best to run the economy, because we do it so well. That is not just because of the things we see in this Budget. If we look back to 2010 and compare it with the Budget for the next few years—we have gone from £6,475 to £12,500—when you represent a constituency with an average income of £27,000, changes like that are significant. People are not continuing to vote Conservative because of what we do in a single Budget; they are continuing to do so because they see a trajectory for the next few years and they see us making life better for them year on year.

Why I am optimistic about the future? Because this Budget allocates £1.6 billion to ensuring that this country stays at the cutting edge of technology and innovation. I went to see Professor Kai Bongs—clever guy, clever name—at the University of Birmingham. He is leading on quantum technology. His team are working on gravity sensors. This might seem a bit abstract, but gravity sensors will help us to see beneath the ground for construction projects. Invariably, people do not get price certainty with construction projects because they do not know completely what is in the ground. Imagine if this country developed technology that allowed for that certainty and then created products that were sold throughout the world. We did it with DNA—identified at the University of Leicester and now used in 120 countries for DNA profiling. We can do it again with other technologies because we believe in our country. We know we have the people to lead us into the future, and it is tiring and depressing to hear people on the Opposition Benches talk down this country, when I know that our future is bright.

4.4 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), though he will not be surprised to learn that I take a slightly different view of the Budget.

The backdrop to the Budget was a singular political claim made a month ago at the Conservative party conference that austerity was over. Every Government is responsible for the consequences of its policies, but with that claim the Prime Minister and her Government took particular responsibility for every closed library, every universal credit rent arrears, every service denied to people.

Let us look, then, at what the Budget really did. The Chancellor used an unexpected increase in tax revenues to fund the health service for the next few years—I welcome extra money for the health service, of course, although by historical standards the rate is unexceptional—but he did not end austerity in other services. Let us take schools, for example. In the first decade of this century, under a Labour Government, there was a 65% increase in funding per pupil. Since 2010, there has been a reduction of 8%. That is a difference between a Labour Government and a Tory Government. When the schools budget is cut, it is a cut in opportunity and in social mobility, there is a reduction in the potential of people to make the most of their talents and it reinforces inequality.

The same is true of crime. The greatest freedom people can have is to go about their daily business free from the fear of crime. In the west midlands, we have lost 2,000 officers. We have seen a 21% increase in violent crime, a 17% increase in crime involving offensive weapons and a 23% increase in sexual offences, and now we are faced, because of pension changes, with the prospect of losing another 450 police officers. This is an attack on people’s freedom, and it strikes the poorest in our society more than others. So the Budget does not present an end to austerity.
There is a particularly absurd nature to the claim: it is being made as we are about to commit an act of enormous economic self-harm. The country needs hope, but the tragedy of Brexit is that, having scapegoated Brussels, immigration and others, we are, in the act of leaving, making it much more difficult to give the country that hope and a plan for the whole country.

4.7 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

I had the dubious pleasure of reporting on nearly 20 Budgets and countless pre-Budget reports in my time as a journalist. Gordon Brown used to stand at the Dispatch Box with his clunking fist and talk about golden rules, fiscal balance and investing for the long term, and the horror show was always in the Red Book. As a journalist, I knew that to see what was in the Budget I had to look in the Red Book.

For days now, journalists across the country have been poring over the Red Book looking for holes similar to those they have found in many other Budgets over the years, but they have failed to do so because the Chancellor has adopted what I would call—pardon the pun—retail policies to address some of the major issues that people in this country face. For example, in 2015 my constituency was the only place in the country with increased footfall in the town centre on the year before, but that was reversed in 2016-17. Our main shopping centre, the Touchwood shopping centre, is now having to invest in the night-time economy, and for the first time I am starting to see empty shops on the high street, so the change in business rates is hugely welcome.

Another of my local high streets, in Shirley—a long, 1960s, straight-line, very old-fashioned high street—is being redeveloped through the intermingling of community resource and people living and being brought into the local area. For example, we have extra care living and other such developments, as we look to a future that is designed not specifically around retail, but around how the high street interacts with our lives. The retail fund of £675 million is therefore hugely welcome.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) made a mainly good speech, which was perhaps too focused on social housing. We need to look at housing in the round. We have to increase the supply of housing in this country. For years, housing has been distended, which in many respects has damaged our economy. That will happen even more now that house prices are so high, because houses have become so unattainable. We therefore need to increase supply.

We have to admit that a deficit of 82% is still too high. It leaves us less able to face a global recession, but we made a decision in 2010 that we would basically try to follow a middle way. We get out of that through productivity—the other way would be inflation, which none of us wants. Productivity is the only way in the long term, and the Budget develops that.

4.10 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Today is exactly two years after the Government promised to introduce a timetable to ratify the Istanbul convention. That important international convention aims to prevent domestic violence and, crucially, to underpin that with support services for victims. The Prime Minister has rightly prioritised tackling violence against women, but what does the Budget contain that shows a commitment to preventing violence against women and girls? Absolutely nothing. The stark evidence on the underfunding of victim services is harrowing. Rape Crisis, the largest national provider of specialist sexual violence services, has a waiting list of over 6,000 people. According to Women’s Aid, on a typical day, 94 women and 90 children are turned away from refuges due to a lack of space. A Council of Europe study shows that England provides only 67% of the recommended capacity for sexual assault referral centres, which are critical in offering services to victims.

When it comes to costing violence against women and girls, there are three areas of consideration: first, the lost economic output of women forced to miss work as a result of mental and physical injuries sustained during an attack; secondly, the cost to the Treasury of providing services that prevent and respond to violence against women and girls—for example, health, police, courts and specialist advocates; and thirdly, the physical and emotional cost to victims, which is a loss to both the individual and society.

Last month I asked the Treasury whether it had made an assessment of the cost of violence against women and girls. It never answered, but passed me to the Home Office, which said that its most recent estimate is nearly a decade old. That suggests that there is no sustained attempt to understand the economics of violence against women and girls.

However, there is more recent research by Professor Sylvia Walby. Taking her 2014 research and adjusting for inflation, the cost of violence against women and girls in this country stands at £23.7 billion per annum. From that we can extrapolate the cost per constituency of not preventing violence against women and girls. In my constituency, the cost is £32.7 million every year. In the Chancellor’s constituency, it is £39.1 million every year.

If the Chancellor looks carefully at the research, he will see that we can do more by investing in support services. Thereby we do the morally right thing, but also the economically right thing. Will the Government please put their money where their mouth is and ensure that all Departments prioritise this?

4.13 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who made a powerful speech.

I welcome many elements of the Budget: the relief for business rates; the reduction in tax on the personal side, and help for coalfield communities such as mine. Those sorts of changes and the economic environment that the Government have created in the past eight years have allowed us to become so attractive that even in a historically challenging part of my constituency like Barrow Hill, there is now the opportunity for Spanish train manufacturers to come and open factories that could create hundreds of jobs. I very much welcome what the Government have done in this and previous Budgets.

Today, we have talked a lot about the challenges in our fiscal policy and the problems in our budget. I would like to draw attention to several points made by
my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who is not in his place. The macroeconomic indicators are moving in the right direction. Our deficit is reducing and our debt is finally going down, but by the end of the period covered by the predations in the Red Book we will still be spending more than we take in as a country, and we will have done so for 20 years.

The challenge we face in western democracies such as ours is that we spend in the good times, we spend in the bad times and we spend in the in-between times. Whatever our views are about spending—I recognise that there are respectful and different views in all parts of the House about the levels of spending we need—we cannot continue to spend in the way we are without paying for it. We are writing cheques in this House without any responsibility for how we are going to cash them. We talked a moment ago about the morality of some of the decisions we have made here. I think the morality before us now is that of not continuing to load problems on to our children and our grandchildren.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) is no longer in his place, but he made a powerful speech about the yawning chasm between certain elements and communities in our country. In my view, there is a yawning chasm between what we are deciding to do here and now, and the money we are choosing to spend, and the people who will have to pick up the tab and pay for that in 20 or 30 years’ time. In the limited time I have left, I would like to draw attention to a number of countries that have decided to say, “Wherever we are and whatever Government we have, we should put in place fiscal rules that mean that should not happen.” Chile did it, the United States tried to do it—not very well, honestly—and Switzerland has done it through its debt break. We should consider fiscal changes that ensure we do not load a lot more debt on to our debt break. We should consider fiscal changes that ensure we do not load a lot more debt on to our debt break. We should consider fiscal changes that ensure we do not load a lot more debt on to our debt break. We should consider fiscal changes that ensure we do not load a lot more debt on to our debt break. We should consider fiscal changes that ensure we do not load a lot more debt on to our debt break.

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The second test is to ask whether the Budget is a spending splurge, as the Government keep suggesting. Well, it certainly is not. As many of my hon. Friends have said, if we strip the extra NHS spending out of the Budget, we can see that all the other departmental budgets are either flat or going backwards in real terms. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has also said that if we strip out spending on the NHS, we see that the Budget does nothing to reverse any of the cuts that we have seen over the past eight years.

That leads us to the claim that austerity is dead. Is this indeed the end of austerity? It is not. It is the start of the Government saying that it is the end of austerity. This is the same Government who said in 2010 that the deficit would be removed by 2015, so we can believe the Prime Minister saying that. However, the Prime Minister saying that this is the end of austerity means that she is admitting that austerity existed. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, every cut that we see across the country now lies at the door of this Prime Minister and No. 10.

Let us look at the priorities being given to tax changes. The Government could easily have brought forward the personal allowance extension for the lower paid and left the upper end as it was, but they have chosen to spend the majority of that personal allowance extension on the very richest in society. That was the wrong thing to do at a time when the deficit looks as though it will never be eradicated under the Government’s long-term plan.
Let us also look at the corporation tax cuts. The Government could have said that they would not take forward the 2p corporation tax cut that they announced in the 2017 Budget, because they already have the lowest corporation tax in the G7 and do not need to take that money. It could have been put towards truly ending austerity.

Let me finish with the biggest lie in Budget history. There is no Brexit deal dividend in this Budget. That was a lie by the Chancellor. Even Standard & Poor’s has said that if there is a no-deal Brexit, unemployment will double, every household will be £3,000 a year worse off, inflation will peak at 5% and the recession will be as long as the one that followed the financial crisis. That is not a Brexit deal dividend. That is the Government’s dereliction of duty towards the economy of this country.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. If colleagues wish to help each other, it is not obligatory for them to speak for the full three minutes. I know that they all believe in equality.

### 4.22 pm

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor spoke—I hope that this was a throwaway phrase—about “little extras”. For me, the Budget is about the little extras that he could have introduced but chose not to. For instance, when announcing the increase to the national living wage, he could have chosen to extend it to the 1.9 million under-25s who are unable to claim it. That would have put more money in their pockets that could be spent on the high street to help the ailing shops that are struggling under this Conservative Government.

The Government could also have chosen to give a little extra help to local authorities, such as my own in Stoke-on-Trent. We have lost on average £653 per person over the past eight years. Compare that with the figure for Cheshire East Council, which is just £120. There is a massive disparity between rural counties and the cities, which need more help. The Government could also have chosen to address the chronic underfunding of our further education system. The deputy principal of Stoke-on-Trent College was outraged at the fact that the Chancellor did not even mention higher or further education in his speech. The funding cap of £4,000 means that the services provided for many of the pupils in my constituency simply cannot continue.

Those little extras pale in comparison with what I think is the most rancid part of this Budget, however. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) pointed out, if the Government had wanted to, they could have decoupled the increase in the personal tax allowance from the threshold for the personal allowance for higher earners. Instead, we have had a piece of parliamentary sleight of hand. This is economic blackmail, and it is downright wrong. It is absolutely wrong that parents who work shifts day and night to make ends meet, due to not having a decent place to live, the strain due to difficulties at home. That shows the stark reality of the truth of the past eight years of Conservative rule. The Government’s austerity, I can tell the Chancellor that having been a councillor during some of the worst years of this Government’s austerity, I can tell the Chancellor that there is no more fat to trim in local government and no more “efficiencies” to be found. This Budget does little
to reverse almost a decade of underinvestment that has brought councils to the brink, including Tory-run Northamptonshire County Council, which has been pushed into bankruptcy.

This is a broken-promises Budget, with its most reassuring moment being the WASPI protest in Westminster Hall. Those women should not have to protest in Parliament; the Government should be listening to them. I have been working closely with 1950s-born women in my constituency over the past few months, and I have heard some heart-breaking accounts, including stories of women who have died while waiting to receive their state pension. However, I have also seen steel determination and their unwavering commitment to continue fighting for what is rightfully theirs. The issue is not going away and these women are not going away, and the Government had better listen sooner rather than later.

Of course, many WASPI women will have to turn to universal credit while they wait for their state pension. The Chancellor completely lacks contact with reality on that issue, as does the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). He pointed out that more money has gone in, but there is not enough money. What do the Chancellor and the hon. Gentleman expect me to say to my constituents on universal credit who come to my surgeries, struggling to get by? Do I tell them that is all right, and that more money is going into universal credit and austerity is coming to an end?

We heard the chorus of Tory MPs chanting along with the Prime Minister at yesterday’s PMQs as she rhymed off things that have gone up under her Government, but I noticed a few things missing from the list: child poverty up; food bank use up; and homelessness up. This Budget does absolutely nothing for my constituents and I cannot possibly support it.

In Slough we have a Labour council, which has managed its budgets well. It seeks to provide excellent services and to protect those most in need. Our Labour councillors in Slough do an excellent job, and they are dedicated public servants, but they are not magicians. They cannot magic up money from the magic money tree when the Chancellor and the Government have made it vanish.

Back in December 2010, the BBC reported that Slough Borough Council would be the hardest hit of all the neighbouring—predominantly Tory—councils in Berkshire. Since then we have seen increasing pressure on budgets, particularly in social care, and an increase in child poverty. According to the charity End Child Poverty, there are more than 11,000 children in poverty in Slough—one in three local children—and that child poverty is rising.

Slough councillors tell me that, by March 2019, the number of people in temporary accommodation will be 70% higher than in April 2018. We have seen a 300% increase in people living in temporary accommodation since 2014. The good people of Slough would be forgiven for thinking that the Chancellor is all smoke—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Very well done.

4.32 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I rise primarily to raise on behalf of my constituents a glaring injustice: the lack of funds for rebuilding New Ferry. Members will remember the horrific explosion in my town in March 2017. To date, the Government have not committed anything like the funds they have handed over to Salisbury, or anything like the funds they have handed over to Belfast for the destroyed Primark. The people of New Ferry are bitterly angry, and their voice must be heard by Ministers on the Treasury Bench.

I listened to what Conservative Members said about tax cuts, and I recognise what is happening. This is just what the American Republicans do. They want big tax cuts for the wealthy, so they choose some so-called middle class profession and, as part of their package of big tax cuts for the wealthy, put in a nugatory amount for those who seem to be in the middle. They persuade the nation that we should have tax cuts on that basis, and they hide what they are doing—handing back huge amounts to the already wealthy—by dressing it up as money for the middle class.

In this Budget we are talking about pennies a week for people on average incomes, and when that is seen alongside the impact of universal credit, everything gets worse for people in the middle. It is not good enough to say that we cannot do better on universal credit when we are giving away £2.8 billion in one year, 84% of which goes to the top half of the distribution, with 34% of that going to the top 10%. That is a regressive measure, and if we believe in progressive politics, we should stand against it and say that what we need is a truly progressive tax system and proper funding for our public services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Chief Secretary will be called no later than 4.40 pm, so the two remainers—the remaining speakers—must divide the time between themselves. [Interruption.] I do not know whether they are remainers or leavers.
Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Austerity is not over for those who are terminally ill. Those with pancreatic cancer, three out of four of whom will die within a year, and those with motor neurone disease, one third of whom will die within a year and half of whom will die within two years, cannot access terminal illness benefits under the current regulations until a doctor decides that they have six months or less to live—that is nonsense. Universal credit, employment and support allowance, and personal independence payments are a nightmare to negotiate for people who have a short time left to live. My ten-minute rule Bill will address this anomaly. It was supported by the Conservative party in Scotland and it will come before this House on 23 November. I hope we will finally make sure that those who are terminally ill have a chance of justice and of dignity as they head towards death. I hope we will ensure that they have a chance to put in place the things that will allow them to stay and live at home with their family, so that they have a chance of dignity in dying, which this Government seem determined to prevent them from having. I recognise that others want to get in at this late stage, so I will stop at this point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Stephen Lloyd, very briefly.

4.36 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. In the short time allocated, I will focus on the universal credit side of the Budget. In 2015, George Osborne made a dreadful mistake, cutting out from universal credit £3 billion per annum from the work allowance. Since my re-election in 2017, I, like my Lib Dem colleagues, have constantly been advocating a restoration of that work allowance element, so that work really does pay—it would not do so without that. For a year and a half, the Conservative party has been constantly pushing back to say, “Work does pay. We do not need to restore the work allowance.” I am glad that finally, on Monday, the Chancellor listened to us and restored £1.7 billion, albeit not all the work allowance that George Osborne had cut.

A number of Opposition Members have discussed this, but I say to the Conservatives that rather than give a substantial tax cut for those at the top end of salaries, people like us and many others, why not put that £1.3 billion, which is the equivalent in respect of the people earning over £50,000, £60,000, £70,000 and £80,000 a year, back into the rest of the work allowance so that it restores what George Osborne catastrophically cut all those years ago? That would mean, first, that work would pay properly within UC, which the Lib Dems agree with—even Labour did years ago, when I was in coalition. Most importantly, it would mean that people earning under £15,000 a year, who were shockingly ignored by this Government in the Budget on Monday, would get some of the tax cut that would be part of the larger work allowance. I believe this House would support that. If the Government do not do that, the Lib Dems would certainly be voting against them on this. So I say to the Chancellor and to the Conservative party: fully restore the work allowance to what it originally was by not giving the extra £600 or £700 a year to the highest paid in this country. That is the right thing to do and I urge the Chancellor to listen.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am glad to see the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in her seat today, as she could not get one on Monday. I wish to comment on what a number of Members have said. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) asked, in a rather perplexed way, why the Government were spending all the headroom. The answer is: because they are up the creek. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) talked about the problems her local authority has because of the Government’s austerity plans. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) spoke similarly, as did many other Members.

The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said young people need to be better off; well, that is why young people are voting Labour. Rather bizarrely, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) talked about sausages and Marxism; I hope his sausages are more sizzling than his speech was.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) made the case for devolution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about how women have been most affected by austerity. [Interruption.] Conservative Members may want to laugh at that sort of thing, but we take that very seriously. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) made a similar case. The theme was there throughout the debate: austerity has not ended and will not end under a Tory Government.

When I entered Parliament, I believed that a primary role of this House was to hold the Government to account. I looked at the parliamentary website to check out my assumption, and found that it says:

“Parliament works on our behalf to try to make sure that Government decisions are...open and transparent”—

that is a foreign land for this Government—

“by questioning ministers and requesting information”

and

“workable and efficient”—

not a concept routinely associated with this Government—

“by examining new proposals closely and suggesting improvements”.

However, the Government have systematically treated the House in the most contemptible way. All Members should be worried. First, the Government stitched up Committees with a Tory majority, even though they are a clapped-out minority Government who are not fit to govern. Secondly, they have obstructed substantive scrutiny of three Finance Bills in a row by not permitting any amendments to the law, which is unprecedented. Thirdly, behind closed doors they agreed a billion-pound deal with another minority party, without proper parliamentary scrutiny or the signatories to the deal being held to account by this place. Fourthly, without precedent they did not provide my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition with the traditional advance copy of the Budget statement. That is wrong. Fifthly, the Chancellor did not even have the courtesy to attend the House when my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor opened the debate on Tuesday afternoon. That is simply disrespectful, not to the individuals but to the protocols of the House.

The power grab by Ministers continues in the Budget resolutions—for example, in resolution 79, which is worryingly designed to give Ministers the ability to amend
key tax legislation ahead of Brexit without parliamentary oversight. That is unprecedented and wrong and we will vote against it. We will continue to raise this egregious contempt for Parliament through any means we possibly can.

As for the Budget itself, the Prime Minister offered an end to austerity, but the promise has turned out to be as hollow as a Halloween pumpkin. The Chancellor claimed it would be a Budget for “the strivers, the grafters and the carers”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018, Vol. 648, c. 653.]
but the spectre of austerity continues to haunt the country, and will do for many years to come.

Leo Docherty: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

There is nothing in the Budget for teachers, police officers and local government workers. There is not a penny for most frontline services, while local council funding is being cut by £1.3 billion next year alone. The Government have broken all their economic targets. They keep setting their own work, but they are marked an F grade every single time. Economic growth has been sluggish and is set to stay below 1.6% for the next five years. Productivity remains 15% lower than in other developed economies and the Government are doing nothing about it. Regional economic disparity is vast. Public sector investment is more than £18 billion lower than in 2010—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Aldershot talked about Marxism and brutal regimes. This is a man who has been to Saudi Arabia many times. That is the sort of brutal regime that he should be worrying about. It is an absolute disgrace.

Public sector investment is more than £18 billion lower than it was in 2010. That is not talking down the economy; that is talking up the truth. If austerity is over, why then is the Chancellor pressing ahead with a further £7 billion of social security cuts? The Health Foundation says that the money for the NHS is not enough. There is, of course, no mention of the £12 billion of outstanding loans and deficits that the NHS has had to use to get by.

On social care, the £650 million announced is less than half what the King’s Fund estimates is needed. Our children’s services are in meltdown. The additional money announced for universal credit is only half what was cut in 2015, and the list goes on and on. There is, of course, no shortage of gimmicks in the Budget. The introduction of a digital services tax is, I am told, already sending the tech companies into a frenzy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) says that it is media management.

In the labour market, one in nine workers across the country is in insecure work. Many are relying on credit cards to survive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) reminded us earlier this week, since 2008 only one in 40 net jobs created has been full time. There was no mention of that particular fly in the ointment by the Chancellor. Eight years of austerity have ripped through our society and our communities, driving in-work poverty and inequality, and further entrenching the economic crisis caused by greed and avarice. Therefore, in that context, we will not stand in the way of more income for low and middle earners; they deserve some respite from the Government. That is unlike the Liberal Democrats, who evidently will be voting against their own flagship tax policy set out in their manifesto.

The Opposition’s amendment to resolution 1 sets out our progressive taxation policy, which we laid out in our manifesto in 2017, of increasing taxes for the top 5% to help pay for improvements in public services, which we all need and which many people across the country need. This amendment highlights our tax reforms, which would shift the emphasis on to the wealthy few, while guaranteeing no further increases of tax on anyone earning less than £80,000. Labour will challenge the Government every step of the way to introduce a more progressive taxation system despite their rigging of Parliament. This is yet another broken-promise Budget that does nothing to end the slowest recovery since the great depression.

Austerity has damaged our economy, weakened our recovery and divided our society. It has made poor people poorer, made them angry, made them fearful, and made them distrustful of the politicians on the Government Benches who they feel do not stand up for them against powerful lobbies. Austerity has made the richest richer; that cannot be right and that cannot be just. It is not in the national interest. Government Members have made a point of claiming that they are not ideological, that they are pragmatists. Let them prove their pragmatism and their open-mindedness. If they are so confident of their policies, so sure of their convictions, then quite simply let them support our amendment. What do they have to fear?

4.48 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I am delighted to be here to close the Budget debate. We have had a very good debate over the past few days. To be honest, though, I am just extremely grateful to be able to get a seat on the Front Bench, because, let us be honest, that has not been guaranteed over the past week.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) rose—

Elizabeth Truss: I am afraid that I only have 10 minutes. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) did not give way, so I am not going to be able to either.

This is a Budget that will help working families and that will grow our economy, and I am pleased to say that it has been welcomed from all quarters—from the cider drinkers of Somerset, to the whisky drinkers of Scotland and Britain’s motorists, who will see better roads and a continued freeze on fuel duty, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch).

Families have had their taxes cut and their wages hiked, and the FSB says that we are firmly on the side of Britain’s small businesses. The Resolution Foundation has welcomed our changes to universal credit, and even the shadow Chancellor has welcomed our tax cuts, saying that our measure “will put more money in people’s pockets” and inject more demand into the economy. It is just a shame that his party does not agree. I can almost hear Momentum sharpening their pitchforks. But I want him to know that all is not lost because, shadow Chancellor,
you have friends on this side of the House. You might have to sit on the Home Secretary’s knee, but there is space for you on our Front Bench.

It is not an accident that we have seen an additional £100 billion coming into the public purse in this Budget. Contrary to what the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) suggests, this is not a fluke or luck. It is because of the decisions that this Government have taken since 2010: reforming the welfare system, cutting taxes for people, and cutting corporation tax to bring more investment into our economy and get more business start-ups going. What happened on the Opposition Benches? Well, Labour Members opposed all those measures, tooth and nail. They opposed our welfare reforms that got more people into work; they opposed our corporation tax cuts that brought more tax into the public coffers; and they opposed our measures to improve skills and education that have meant that our children are doing better.

Instead of Labour Members realising the error of their ways, they have come up with even more extreme policies. They want to create a socialist superstate controlled by the politicians at the top of the Labour party. Their eye-watering spending pledges would mean £1,000 billion more in tax and borrowing, job-killing tax hikes on hard-working families, and the relentless talking down of everything that is good about our country. If we listened to Labour, there would be fewer jobs, lower wages and less money to spend on public services, so we refuse to listen to this catalogue of envy and despair.

Instead, we have delivered a positive, aspirational Budget, giving people more control over their own money. We have put £630 a year for families into universal credit. We are cutting taxes for those on the basic rate by £130 this year, making people £1,200 better off. And we are raising the higher rate threshold so that people do not start paying higher rate tax until they earn £50,000. This is not about giving tax cuts to millionaires; these are people on medium incomes who were dragged into the top rate of tax under the Labour Government.

At the same time, our strong economy means that we can fund the services on which everyone relies, which is why this Budget has included extra money for defence, schools, the health system and local authorities, and we are going to spend this money in a way that delivers results. The hon. Member for Bootle talked about children’s services. Not only are we giving councils an extra £650 million to pay for adult and children’s social care; we are also rolling out programmes such as “No Wrong Door” in North Yorkshire. That programme has meant fewer children in care, fewer ending up in trouble with the police and fewer ending up in accident and emergency. It is a great example of how, by spending money in the right way, we can cut long-term costs for the taxpayer and, more importantly, ensure that our children get the best possible start in life.

I also want to applaud the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for what she said in this debate. I applaud her for her bravery in standing up against those gangs targeting young women in her area. I am very happy to discuss in the spending review the issue that she raised.

As well as addressing the immediate issues we face, this Budget backs entrepreneurs to take risks, make investments and grow their operations. We have slashed business rates by a third, which has been welcomed by my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) and for Solihull (Julian Knight). We have cut corporation tax to the lowest level in the G20. We have increased capital allowances from £200,000 to £1 million. What all that means is that companies want to grow, want to invest in Britain and want to take more people on. It means more jobs for people across this country. It means higher wages. We are now seeing real wages rise for the three quarters of people who are employed in the private sector. It also means that we are able to afford money for our public services. We are launching 10 new development corporations across the country, so we will not just have Canary Wharf—we will have Canary Wharf in the north and all other parts of the country. We are creating a special economic zone in Teesside, with new freedoms to grow.

But this is not just about cold, hard cash; it is about realising people’s aspirations, dreams and hopes for the future. It is about being able to afford a holiday or a car, and it is about more opportunities for young people emerging from our schools and our colleges.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): This is a good Budget and I will, without any question, support it enthusiastically tonight. However, there is the issue of the starting date for the reduction to £2 for fixed odds betting terminals. This is clearly not something we can deal with this evening, but I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would give an undertaking that we will certainly return to it in time for the Finance Bill.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point. We have brought the date forward for FOBTs by six months. I do not believe that it is an issue for the Finance Bill, but I am certainly happy to discuss with him what more we can do.

Whereas we are making sure that young people emerging from our schools and colleges have opportunities, and that people are able to fulfil their dreams and aspirations, Labour Members would kill those dreams.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) rose—

Elizabeth Truss: They are driven by pessimism, by envy and by spite. The reality is that they would rather see people kept in their place than succeeding.

Jess Phillips rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady knows as well as I do that you cannot stay on your feet if the Minister is not going to give way. [Interruption.] You do know that. Oh come on now, you could not have done that six months ago.

Elizabeth Truss: I have only two minutes left, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am afraid I cannot give way. Labour’s tax hikes would cost jobs and its war on enterprise would crush the very people who make this country great.

The past eight years have been tough, but Monday’s Budget marked a new era. It is about more jobs than ever before. It is about businesses succeeding. It is about
wages going up. It is about people keeping more of what they earn. It is about people feeling better off in their everyday lives. This is a Budget for a confident, optimistic British future that puts more money in people’s pockets, frees enterprise to invest, and paves the way for a high-growth, high-aspiration post-Brexit Britain. I commend this Budget to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 246, Noes 313.

Division No. 252] [4.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbahms, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Amess, Mike
Antoniacci, Tony
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Bells, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Richard
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David

Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, rh Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, rh Mark
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Husain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.

Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinlock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonnell, rh John
McPadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pescock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy

Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skillin, Mr Dennis
Slatter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
follows—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am now required under Standing Order No. 51(3) to put successively, without further debate, the Questions on each of the Ways and Means motions numbered 2 to 80, on the motion on Finance (Money), and on the motion on which the Bill is to be brought in. These motions are set out in a separate paper distributed with today’s Order Paper. I must inform the House that, for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83(U), and on the basis of material put before him, the Speaker has certified that in his opinion the following motion relates exclusively to England, Wales and Northern Ireland and is within devolved legislative competence: motion 3, on Income Tax (main rates). Should the House divide on this motion it will be subject to double majority voting.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the motions made in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Standing Order No. 51(3)).

2. CORPORATION TAX (CHARGE FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2020)

Resolved.

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made charging corporation tax for the financial year 2020.

3. INCOME TAX (MAIN RATES)

Resolved.

That for the tax year 2019-20 the main rates of income tax are as follows—

(a) the basic rate is 20%;
(b) the higher rate is 40%;
(c) the additional rate is 45%.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

4. INCOME TAX (DEFAULT AND SAVINGS RATES)

Resolved.

That—

(1) For the tax year 2019-20 the default rates of income tax are as follows—

(a) the default basic rate is 20%;
(b) the default higher rate is 40%;
(c) the default additional rate is 45%.

(2) For the tax year 2019-20 the savings rates of income tax are as follows—

(a) the savings basic rate is 20%;
(b) the savings higher rate is 40%;
(c) the savings additional rate is 45%.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5. BASIC RATE LIMIT AND PERSONAL ALLOWANCE FOR TAX YEAR 2019-20

Question put.

That—

(1) For the tax year 2019-20, the amount specified in section 10(5) of the Income Tax Act 2007 (basic rate limit) is “£37,500”.
(2) For the tax year 2019-20, the amount specified in section 35(1) of the Income Tax Act 2007 (personal allowance) is “£12,500”.
(3) Accordingly, for the tax year 2019-20—

(a) section 21 of the Income Tax Act 2007 (indexation of basic rate limit and starting rate limit for savings) does not apply in relation to the basic rate limit, and
(b) section 57 of the Income Tax Act 2007 (indexation of allowances) does not apply in relation to the amount specified in section 35(1) of that Act.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.


Division No. 253] [5.15 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellwood, tr Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evannett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Ford, Rhicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holliday, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, rh Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, rh Ian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leight, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
  
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neil, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O’Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Passwey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philip, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, rh Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Rhoyston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Styud, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Sym, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Ms Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Ms Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggan, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, John
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Paul Maynard and Jo Churchill

NOES
Jardine, Christine
Jones, Helen
Kendall, Liz
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lucas, Caroline
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Phillips, Jess
Powell, Lucy
Reynolds, Emma
12. BENEFICIARIES OF EMPLOYER-PROVIDED PENSION BENEFITS

Resolved,
That provision may be made extending the exemption from income tax under section 307 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 so that, so far as the exemption relates to benefits paid or given in respect of an employee, it applies to benefits paid or given to any other individual or to a charity.

13. TAX TREATMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY INCOME

Resolved,

14. DISPOSALS OF LAND IN THE UNITED KINGDOM BY NON-UK RESIDENTS ETC

Resolved,
That provision may be made for the purposes of the taxation of chargeable gains—
(a) about disposals by persons not resident in the United Kingdom of interests in land in the United Kingdom or of other assets deriving at least 75% of their value from such interests,
(b) about collective investment vehicles that hold such interests or other assets,
(c) abolishing the specific charge to tax on ATED-related chargeable gains (which relates to certain disposals of interests in land in the United Kingdom), and
(d) in connection with the provision mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (c), rewriting Part 1 of (or any other provision of) the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 without changing its substantive effect.

15. RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY GAINS ON DISPOSALS OF LAND IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Resolved,
That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year may be made for the purposes of capital gains tax requiring returns, and payments on account of capital gains tax, to be made in the case of disposals of interests in land in the United Kingdom on which residential property gains accrue.

16. OFFSHORE RECEIPTS IN RESPECT OF INTANGIBLE PROPERTY

Resolved,
That provision may be made imposing a charge to income tax on a person who—
(a) is not resident in the United Kingdom or a full treaty territory, and
(b) receives or is entitled to amounts in respect of the enjoyment or exercise of rights that constitute any intangible property, where the enjoyment or exercise enables, facilitates or promotes sales in the United Kingdom.

17. AVOIDANCE INVOLVING PROFIT FRAGMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

Resolved,
That provision for the purposes of income tax and corporation tax may be made for countering the tax effects of arrangements under which value deriving from the profits of a business is transferred to an overseas person or entity.
18. NON-UK RESIDENT COMPANIES CARRYING ON UK PROPERTY BUSINESSES ETC

Resolved.

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year may be made for non-UK resident companies to be chargeable to corporation tax on—
(a) profits of UK property businesses,
(b) profits consisting of other income relating to land in the United Kingdom, and
(c) profits arising from certain loan relationships and derivative contracts.

19. DIVERTED PROFITS TAX (LENGTH OF REVIEW PERIOD)

Resolved.

That—

(1) In section 101 of the Finance Act 2015 (diverted profits tax: HMRC review of charging notice)—
(a) in subsection (2) (meaning of “review period”) for “12 months” substitute “15 months”, and
(b) in subsection (13) (events that bring the review period to an end early) for “12 months” substitute “15 months”.

(2) The amendments made by this Resolution do not have effect in relation to a review period that, but for the amendments, expired before 29 October 2018.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

20. DIVERTED PROFITS TAX

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about diverted profits tax.

21. HYBRID AND OTHER MISMATCHES

Resolved.

That the following provision may be made—
(a) provision amending Chapter 8 of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010, and
(b) provision amending section 259N of that Act.

22. CONTROLLED FOREIGN COMPANIES

Resolved.

That the following provision relating to controlled foreign companies may be made—
(a) provision restricting the exemption under Chapter 9 of Part 9A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 for profits from qualifying loan relationships;
(b) provision amending Chapter 18 of that Part so as to treat non-UK resident companies as controlled foreign companies.

23. PERMANENT ESTABLISHMENTS

Resolved.

That provision may be made restricting the application of section 1143 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010.

24. CAPITAL GAINS TAX (PAYMENT OF EXIT CHARGES)

Resolved.

That provision may be made for the payment in instalments of capital gains tax to which liability arises by virtue of section 25 or 80 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992.

25. CORPORATION TAX EXIT CHARGES

Resolved.

That provision may be made—
(a) about exit charge payment plans,
(b) repealing section 187 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992,
(c) repealing sections 860 to 862 of the Corporation Tax Act 2009, and
(d) about assets that have been the subject of a charge to tax under the law of a member State in accordance with Article 5(1) of Directive (EU) 2016/1164 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2016.

26. GROUP RELIEF ETC (MEANING OF “UK RELATED” COMPANY)

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending sections 134 and 188CJ of the Corporation Tax Act 2010.

27. INTANGIBLE FIXED ASSETS

Resolved.

That provision may be made amending Part 8 of the Corporation Tax Act 2009.

28. CORPORATION TAX RELIEF FOR CARRIED-FORWARD LOSSES

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about corporation tax relief for losses and other amounts that are carried forward.

29. CORPORATE INTEREST RESTRICTION

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Part 10 of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010.

30. DEBTOR RELATIONSHIPS WHERE MONEY LENT TO CONNECTED COMPANIES

Resolved.

That provision may be made for preventing a mismatch for corporation tax purposes in any case where—
(a) a company has a debtor relationship which is dealt with in its accounts on the basis of fair value accounting, and
(b) the money it receives under that relationship is wholly or mainly used to lend money to companies that are connected with it.

31. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES)

Resolved.

That provision may be made conferring power on the Treasury by regulations to amend the Capital Allowances Act 2001 so as to provide for allowances under that Act to be available in prescribed cases where—
(a) expenditure has been incurred on the construction, renovation or conversion of a building or structure that is used for business purposes, or
(b) capital expenditure has been incurred on repairs to such a building or structure.

32. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (SPECIAL RATE EXPENDITURE ON PLANT AND MACHINERY)

Resolved,
That provision may be made about the rate applicable in determining the amount of the writing-down allowance to which a person is entitled in respect of special rate expenditure on plant and machinery.

33. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (ANNUAL INVESTMENT ALLOWANCE)

Resolved,
That provision may be made increasing the maximum amount of annual investment allowance under section 51A of the Capital Allowances Act 2001 to £1,000,000 for expenditure incurred during the period of two years beginning with 1 January 2019.

34. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (FIRST-YEAR ALLOWANCES AND FIRST-YEAR TAX CREDITS)

Resolved,
That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year may be made for the abolition of first-year allowances and first-year tax credits for expenditure on energy-saving plant or machinery or environmentally beneficial plant or machinery.

35. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (EXPENDITURE ON ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGE POINTS)

Resolved,
That provision may be made amending section 45EA(3) of the Capital Allowances Act 2001.

36. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (MEANING OF “PLANT”)

Resolved,
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about the meaning of “plant” in list C in section 23(4) of the Capital Allowances Act 2001.

37. LEASES (CHANGES TO ACCOUNTING STANDARDS ETC)

Resolved,
That the following provision relating to leases may be made—
(a) provision for the purposes of income tax and corporation tax in connection with changes to accounting standards relating to leases,
(b) provision about the definition of “short lease” for the purposes of Part 2 of the Capital Allowances Act 2001,
(c) provision about the interest rate implicit in a lease for the purposes of section 70O of the Capital Allowances Act 2001, and
(d) provision repealing section 53 of the Finance Act 2011.

38. OIL ACTIVITIES (TRANSFERABLE TAX HISTORY)

Resolved,
That provision may be made for a company which sells an interest in an oil licence and a company which buys that interest to make a joint election for an amount of the seller’s profits to be treated as if it were an amount of the purchaser’s profits.

39. PETROLEUM REVENUE TAX

Resolved,
That provision may be made about the treatment of decommissioning expenditure, following the transfer of an interest in an oil field, for the purposes of the Oil Taxation Act 1975.

40. CAPITAL GAINS TAX (ENTREPRENEURS’ RELIEF)

Resolved,
That the following provision relating to entrepreneurs’ relief may be made—
(a) provision about the periods throughout which conditions for relief under Chapter 3 of Part 5 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 must be met,
b) provision imposing additional requirements for the purposes of that Chapter in connection with the beneficial ownership of companies, and
(c) provision amending that Part in relation to the availability of relief where a company has ceased to be an individual’s personal company.

41. GIFT AID ETC (RESTRICTIONS ON ASSOCIATED BENEFITS)

Resolved,
That provision may be made about the restrictions on associated benefits that apply in determining the availability of gift aid relief or charitable donations relief.

42. CHARITIES (SMALL TRADES EXEMPTION LIMITS)

Resolved,
That provision may be made amending the requisite limit in section 528(6) of the Income Tax Act 2007 and section 482(6) of the Corporation Tax Act 2010.

43. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (RELIEF FOR FIRST-TIME BUYERS IN CASES OF SHARED OWNERSHIP)

Resolved,
That—
(1) Schedule 9 to the Finance Act 2003 (stamp duty land tax: shared ownership leases etc) is amended as follows.
(2) In paragraph 4 (shared ownership lease: election where staircasing allowed), after sub-paragraph (4) insert—
“(4A) See paragraph 15 for further provision in connection with relief for first-time buyers.”
(3) After paragraph 14 insert—
“Relief for first-time buyers: shared ownership lease where election made
15 Where—
(a) paragraph 4 applies, and
(b) relief is claimed under paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA in respect of the grant of the lease concerned,
no tax is chargeable in respect of so much of the chargeable consideration for the grant as consists of rent.”
(4) After paragraph 15 (as inserted by paragraph (3)) insert—
“Relief for first-time buyers: shared ownership lease where no election made
15A (1) This paragraph applies where—
(a) a shared ownership lease is granted, and
(b) no election is made for tax to be charged in accordance with paragraph 2 or 4.
(2) For the purpose of determining whether the second condition in paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA is met in respect of the grant, the chargeable consideration for
the grant is to be treated as being the amount stated in the lease in accordance with paragraph 2 (2)(c) or paragraph 4(2)(c)(i) or (ii).

(3) If relief is claimed in respect of the grant under paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA no tax is chargeable in respect of so much of the chargeable consideration for the grant as consists of rent.

(4) In this paragraph “shared ownership lease” has the same meaning as in paragraph 4A.

Relief for first-time buyers: shared ownership trust where no election made

15B (1) This paragraph applies where—
(a) a shared ownership trust is declared, and
(b) no election is made for tax to be charged in accordance with paragraph 9.

(2) For the purpose of determining whether the second condition in paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA is met in respect of the declaration, the chargeable consideration for the declaration is to be treated as being the sum specified in the trust in accordance with paragraph 7(4)(c).

(3) If relief is claimed in respect of the declaration under paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA no tax is chargeable in respect of any rent-equivalent payment treated by reason of paragraph 11 (b) as rent.”

(5) For the italic cross-heading before paragraph 16 substitute “No relief for first-time buyers for staircasing transactions etc”.

(6) In paragraph 16 (cases where first-time buyer’s relief is not available)—
(a) in sub-paragraph (1), omit paragraphs (a), (b) and (d) (but not “or” at the end of paragraph (d)), and
(b) in sub-paragraph (2), omit paragraphs (a) and (c) (but not “or” at the end of paragraph (c)).

(7) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to—
(a) any land transaction of which the effective date is on or after 29 October 2018, and
(b) any land transaction of which the effective date is before 29 October 2018 and in respect of which a land transaction return has not been given by that date.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

44. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (REPAYMENT TO FIRST-TIME BUYERS IN CASES OF SHARED OWNERSHIP)

Resolved,
That—
(1) Until 29 October 2019, a claim for the repayment of tax may be made in respect of a land transaction within paragraph (2) or (3).

(2) A transaction is within this paragraph if the amount of tax chargeable in respect of the transaction would have been less had the amendment made by paragraph (3) of the preceding Resolution been in force from the effective date of the transaction.

(3) A transaction is within this paragraph if first-time buyer’s relief—
(a) could not have been claimed for the transaction, but
(b) could have been claimed had the amendments made by paragraphs (4), (5) and (6) of the preceding Resolution been in force from the effective date of the transaction.

(4) Where a claim is made under this Resolution, HMRC must repay—
(a) in a case where the transaction is within paragraph (2), so much of the tax paid as exceeds the amount that would have been chargeable had the amendment made by paragraph (3) of the preceding Resolution been in force from the effective date of the transaction, and

(b) in a case where the transaction is within paragraph (3), so much of the tax paid as exceeds the amount that would have been chargeable had the amendments made by paragraphs (4), (5) and (6) of the preceding Resolution been in force from the effective date of the transaction and had a claim for first-time buyer’s relief been made.

(5) A claim under this Resolution must be made by amendment of the land transaction return.

(6) Sub-paragraphs (2A) and (3) of paragraph 6 of Schedule 10 to the Finance Act 2003 do not apply in the case of an amendment of a land transaction return made for the purpose of making a claim under this Resolution.

(7) In this Resolution—
(a) the expressions used have the same meaning as in Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003;
(b) “first-time buyer’s relief” means relief under Schedule 6ZA to the Finance Act 2003

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

45. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (HIGHER RATES OF TAX FOR ADDITIONAL DWELLING ETC)

Resolved,
That—
(1) Schedule 4ZA to the Finance Act 2003 (stamp duty land tax: higher rates for additional dwellings and dwellings purchased by companies) is amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 2 (meaning of “higher rates transaction” etc) after sub-paragraph (4) insert—

“(5) References in this Schedule to a major interest in a dwelling include an undivided share in a major interest in a dwelling.”

(3) The amendment made by paragraph (2) has effect in relation to any land transaction of which the effective date is on or after 29 October 2018.

(4) In paragraph 8(3) (period during which land transaction return may be amended to take account of subsequent disposal of main residence) for the words from “whichever” to the end substitute “the period of 12 months beginning with—

(a) the effective date of the subsequent transaction, or
(b) if later, the filing date for the return.”

(5) The amendment made by paragraph (4) has effect in a case where the effective date of the subsequent transaction is on or after 29 October 2018.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

46. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (EXEMPTIONS FOR FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN RESOLUTION)

Resolved,
That provision may be made for land transactions to be exempt from the charge to stamp duty land tax if they are effected by or under certain instruments made under the Banking Act 2009.

47. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (CHANGES TO PERIODS FOR DELIVERING RETURNS AND PAYING TAX)

Resolved,
That—
(1) The Finance Act 2003 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 76(1) (duty to deliver land transaction return), for “30 days” substitute “14 days”.
(3) For section 80(2) (adjustment where contingency ceases or consideration is ascertained) substitute—

“(2) If the effect of the new information is that a transaction becomes notifiable, the purchaser must make a return to the Inland Revenue within 14 days.

(2A) If the effect of the new information is that—
(a) tax is payable in respect of a transaction where none was payable before and subsection (2) does not apply, or
(b) additional tax is payable in respect of a transaction, the purchaser must make a further return to the Inland Revenue within 30 days.

(2B) For the purposes of subsection (2) and (2A), any tax or additional tax payable is calculated according to the effective date of the transaction.

(2C) If a purchaser is required to make a return under subsection (2) or a further return under subsection (2A)—
(a) that return must contain a self-assessment of the tax chargeable in respect of the transaction on the basis of the information contained in the return, and
(b) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.”

(4) In section 81 (further return where relief withdrawn)—

(i) in subsection (1B)—

“(c) in the case of relief under paragraph 5CA of that Schedule (acquisition by management company of flat for occupation by caretaker), the first day in the period mentioned in paragraph 5IA(2) of that Schedule on which the purchaser holds the higher threshold interest otherwise than for the purpose of the regulated home reversion plan, unless paragraph 5IA(3)(a) and (b) applies;”, and

(ii) after paragraph (d) insert—

“(da) in the case of relief under paragraph 5EA of that Schedule (acquisition by management company of flat for occupation by caretaker), the first day in the period mentioned in paragraph 5IA(2) of that Schedule on which the purchaser holds the higher threshold interest otherwise than for the purpose of making the flat available for use as caretaker accommodation;”, and

(b) in subsection (2A), after “subsection (1)” insert “or (1A)”,

(5) For section 81A(1) (return or further in consequence of later linked transaction) substitute—

“(1) Where the effect of a transaction (“the later transaction”) that is linked to an earlier transaction is that the earlier transaction becomes notifiable, the purchaser under the earlier transaction must deliver a return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 14 days after the effective date of the later transaction.

(1A) Where the effect of a transaction (“the later transaction”) that is linked to an earlier transaction is that—

(a) tax is payable in respect of the earlier transaction where none was payable before and subsection (1) does not apply, or

(b) additional tax is payable in respect of the earlier transaction, the purchaser under the earlier transaction must deliver a further return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 30 days after the effective date of the later transaction.

(1B) For the purpose of subsections (1) and (1A), any tax or additional tax payable is calculated according to the effective date of the earlier transaction.

(1C) Where a purchaser is required to deliver a return under subsection (1) or a further return under subsection (1A)—

(a) that return must include a self-assessment of the amount of tax chargeable as a result of the later transaction, and

(b) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.”

(6) In section 86(2) (payment of tax), before paragraph (a) insert—

“(za) any of paragraphs 5G to 5K of Schedule 4A (higher rate for certain transactions).”,

(7) In section 87 (interest on unpaid tax)—

(a) after subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) But where the relevant date is determined by subsection (3)(aa), (aa), (ab) or (c) and a return is required to be delivered before the end of the period of 14 days after that transaction, interest is instead payable on the amount of any unpaid tax from the end of that period until the tax is paid.”,

(b) in subsection (2), after “subsection (1)” insert “or (1A)”, and

(c) in subsection (3), before paragraph (a) insert—

“(za) in the case of an amount payable because relief is withdrawn under any of paragraphs 5G to 5K of Schedule 4A (higher rate for certain transactions), the date which is the relevant date for the purposes of section 81(1A).”

(8) In Schedule 17A (further provisions relating to leases)—

(a) for paragraph 3(3) substitute—

“(3) Where the effect of sub-paragraph (2) in relation to the continuation of the lease for a period (or further period) of one year after the end of a fixed term is that a transaction becomes notifiable, the purchaser must deliver a return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 14 days after the end of that one year period.

(3A) Where the effect of sub-paragraph (2) in relation to the continuation of the lease for a period (or further period) of one year after the end of a fixed term is that—

(a) tax is payable in respect of a transaction where none was payable before and sub-paragraph (3) does not apply, or

(b) additional tax is payable in respect of a transaction, the purchaser must deliver a return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 30 days after the end of that one year period.

(3B) For the purposes of sub-paragraphs (3) and (3A), any tax or additional tax payable is calculated according to the effective date of the transaction.

(3C) Where a purchaser is required to deliver a return under sub-paragraph (3) or a further return under sub-paragraph (3A)—

(a) that return must include a self-assessment of the amount of tax chargeable in respect of the transaction on the basis of the information contained in the return, and

(b) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.”,

(b) for paragraph 4(3) substitute—

“(3) Where the effect of sub-paragraph (1) in relation to the continuation of the lease after the end of a deemed fixed term is that a transaction becomes notifiable, the purchaser must deliver a return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 14 days after the end of that term.

(3A) Where the effect of sub-paragraph (1) in relation to the continuation of the lease after the end of a deemed fixed term is that—

(a) tax is payable in respect of a transaction where none was payable before and sub-paragraph (3) does not apply, or

(b) additional tax is payable in respect of a transaction, the purchaser must deliver a further return in respect of that transaction before the end of the period of 30 days after the end of that term.

(3B) For the purposes of sub-paragraphs (3) and (3A), any tax or additional tax payable is calculated according to the effective date of the transaction.

(3C) Where a purchaser is required to deliver a return under sub-paragraph (3) or a further return under sub-paragraph (3A)—

(a) that return must include a self-assessment of the amount of tax chargeable in respect of the transaction on the basis of the information contained in the return, and

(b) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.”,
(3B) For the purposes of sub-paragraphs (3) and (3A), any tax or additional tax payable is calculated according to the effective date of the transaction.

(3C) Where a purchaser is required to deliver a return under sub-paragraph (3) or a further return under sub-paragraph (3A)—

(a) that return must include a self-assessment of the amount of tax chargeable in respect of the transaction on the basis of the information contained in the return, and

(b) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.

“(3) If the result as regards the rent paid or payable in respect of the first five years of the term of the lease is that a transaction becomes notifiable/the purchaser must make a return to the Inland Revenue within 14 days of the date referred to in sub-paragraph (1)(a) or (b).

(3A) If the result as regards the rent paid or payable in respect of the first five years of the term of the lease is that—

(a) tax is payable in respect of a transaction where none was payable before and sub-paragraph (3) does not apply, or

(b) additional tax is payable in respect of a transaction, the purchaser must make a further return to the Inland Revenue within 30 days of the date referred to in sub-paragraph (1)(a) or (b).

(3B) If a purchaser is required to make a return under sub-paragraph (3) or a further return under sub-paragraph (3A)—

(a) that return must contain a self-assessment of the tax chargeable in respect of the transaction on the basis of the information contained in the return,

(b) the tax so chargeable is to be calculated by reference to the rates in force at the effective date of the transaction, and

(c) the tax or additional tax payable must be paid not later than the filing date for that return.”

(9) In Schedule 61 to the Finance Act 2009 (alternative finance investment bonds)—

(a) in paragraph 7(5) (interest due on first transaction where relief is withdrawn) for “30 days” substitute “14 days”, and

(b) in paragraph 20(3)(a) (no relief where bond-holder acquires control of underlying asset) for “30 days” substitute “14 days”.

(10) The amendments made by this Resolution are to be treated as having effect in relation to—

(a) any land transaction with an effective date on or after 1 March 2019, and

(b) any land transaction with an effective date before 1 March 2019 which becomes notifiable on or after 1 March 2019.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

(b) the person transferring the securities is connected with the company or is the nominee of a person connected with the company.

(2) “Listed securities” are stock or marketable securities which are regularly traded on—

(a) a regulated market,

(b) a multilateral trading facility, or

(c) a recognised foreign exchange, and expressions used in sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) have the same meaning as in section 80B of the Finance Act 1986 (intermediaries: supplementary).

(3) For the purposes of the enactments relating to stamp duty—

(a) in a case where listed securities are transferred for consideration which consists of money or any stock or security, or to which section 57 of the Stamp Act 1891 applies, the amount or value of the consideration is to be treated as being equal to—

(i) the amount or value of the consideration for the transfer, or

(ii) if higher, the value of the listed securities;

(b) in any other case, the transfer of listed securities effected by the instrument is to be treated as being for an amount of consideration in money equal to the value of the listed securities.

(4) For the purposes of paragraph (3)—

(a) “the enactments relating to stamp duty” means the Stamp Act 1891 and any enactment amending that Act or that is to be construed as one with that Act, and

(b) the value of listed securities is to be taken to be the price which they might reasonably be expected to fetch on a sale in the open market at the date the instrument is executed.

(5) Section 1122 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 (connected persons) has effect for the purposes of this Resolution.

(6) The Treasury may by regulations made by statutory instrument provide for this Resolution not to apply in relation to particular cases.

(7) Regulations under paragraph (6) may have effect in relation to instruments executed before the regulations come into force.

(8) A statutory instrument containing regulations under paragraph (6) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of the House of Commons.

(9) This Resolution is to be construed as one with the Stamp Act 1891.

(10) This Resolution has effect in relation to instruments executed on or after 29 October 2018.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of section 50 of the Finance Act 1973.

49. STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX (LISTED SECURITIES AND CONNECTED PERSONS) Resolved.

That—

(1) This Resolution applies if a person is connected with a company and—

(a) the person or the person’s nominee agrees to transfer listed securities to the company or the company’s nominee (whether or not for consideration), or

(b) the person or the person’s nominee transfers such securities to the company or the company’s nominee for consideration in money or money’s worth.

(2) “Listed securities” are chargeable securities which are regularly traded on—

(a) a regulated market,

(b) a multilateral trading facility, or

(c) a recognised foreign exchange.
and expressions used in sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) have the same meaning as in section 88B of the Finance Act 1986 (intermediaries: supplementary).

(3) For the purposes of stamp duty reserve tax chargeable under section 87 of the Finance Act 1986 (the principal charge)—

(a) in a case where the agreement is one to transfer listed securities for consideration in money or money’s worth, the amount or value of the consideration is to be treated as being equal to—

(i) the amount or value of the consideration for the transfer, or

(ii) if higher, the value of the listed securities at the time the agreement is made;

(b) in any other case, the agreement to transfer listed securities is to be treated as being one for an amount of consideration in money equal to the value of the listed securities at the time the agreement is made.

(4) Paragraph (5) has effect for the purposes of stamp duty reserve tax chargeable under section 93 (depository receipts) or 96 (clearance services) of the Finance Act 1986.

(5) If the amount or value of the consideration for any transfer of listed securities is less than the value of those securities at the time they are transferred, the transfer is to be treated as being for an amount of consideration in money equal to that value.

(6) For the purposes of this Resolution, the value of listed securities at any time is the price which they might reasonably be expected to fetch on a sale in the open market at that time.

(7) Section 1122 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 (connected persons) has effect for the purposes of this Resolution.

(8) The Treasury may by regulations made by statutory instrument provide for this Resolution not to apply in relation to particular cases.

(9) Regulations under paragraph (8) may have effect in relation to transactions entered into before the regulations come into force.

(10) A statutory instrument containing regulations under paragraph (8) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of the House of Commons.

(11) This Resolution is to be construed as one with Part 4 of the Finance Act 1986.

(12) This Resolution has effect—

(a) in relation to the charge to tax under section 87 of the Finance Act 1986 where—

(i) the agreement to transfer securities is conditional and the condition is satisfied on or after 29 October 2018, or

(ii) in any other case, the agreement is made on or after that date;

(b) in relation to the charge to tax under section 93 or 96 of that Act, where the transfer is on or after 29 October 2018 (whenever the arrangement was made).

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

50. STAMP DUTY (EXEMPTIONS FOR FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN RESOLUTION)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for stamp duty not to be chargeable on transfers of stock or marketable securities by or under certain instruments made under the Banking Act 2009.

51. STAMP DUTY AND STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX (EXEMPTIONS FOR SHARE INCENTIVE PLANS)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending section 95 of the Finance Act 2001 so as to refer to a Schedule 2 SIP under Schedule 2 to the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.

52. VALUE ADDED TAX (ACCOUNTING FOR TAX ON CERTAIN SUPPLIES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made in relation to the application of section 55A(3) of the Value Added Tax Act 1994.

53. VALUE ADDED TAX (TREATMENT OF VOUCHERS)

Resolved,

That—

(1) The Value Added Tax Act 1994 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 51B—

(a) in the heading, at the end insert “issued before 1 January 2019”;

(b) the existing text becomes subsection (1);

(c) after that subsection insert—

“(2) Schedule 10A does not have effect with respect to a face value voucher (within the meaning of that Schedule) issued on or after 1 January 2019.”

(3) After section 51B insert—

“51C Vouchers issued on or after 1 January 2019

(1) Schedule 10B makes provision about the VAT treatment of vouchers.

(2) Schedule 10B has effect with respect to a voucher (within the meaning of that Schedule) issued on or after 1 January 2019.

51D Postage stamps issued on or after 1 January 2019.

(1) The issue of a postage stamp, and any subsequent transfer of it, is a supply of services for the purposes of this Act.

(2) The consideration for the issue or subsequent transfer of a postage stamp is to be disregarded for the purposes of this Act, except to the extent (if any) that it exceeds the face value of the stamp.

(3) The “face value” of the stamp is the amount stated on or recorded in the stamp or the terms and conditions governing its use.

(4) This section has effect with respect to postage stamps issued on or after 1 January 2019.

(5) After Schedule 10A insert—

“SCHEDULE 10B

VAT TREATMENT OF VOUCHERS ISSUED ON OR AFTER 1 JANUARY 2019

Meaning of “voucher”

1 (1) In this Schedule “voucher” means an instrument (in physical or electronic form) in relation to which the following conditions are met.

(2) The first condition is that one or more persons are under an obligation to accept the instrument as consideration for the provision of goods or services.

(3) The second condition is that either or both of—

(a) the goods and services for the provision of which the instrument may be accepted as consideration, and

(b) the persons who are under the obligation to accept the instrument as consideration for the provision of goods or services, are limited and are stated on or recorded in the instrument or the terms and conditions governing the use of the instrument.

(4) The third condition is that the instrument is transferrable by gift (whether or not it is transferable for consideration).

(5) The following are not vouchers—
2 (1) This paragraph gives the meaning of other expressions used in this Schedule.

(2) “Relevant goods or services”, in relation to a voucher, are any goods or services for the provision of which the voucher may be accepted as consideration.

(3) References in this Schedule to the transfer of a voucher do not include the voucher being offered and accepted as consideration for the provision of relevant goods or services.

(4) References in this Schedule to a voucher being offered or accepted as consideration for the provision of relevant goods or services include references to the voucher being offered or accepted as part consideration for the provision of relevant goods or services.

VAT treatment of vouchers: general rule

3 (1) The issue, and any subsequent transfer, of a voucher is to be treated for the purposes of this Act as a supply of relevant goods or services.

(2) References in this Schedule to the “paragraph 3 supply”, in relation to the issue or transfer of a voucher, are to the supply of relevant goods or services treated by this paragraph as having been made on the issue or transfer of the voucher.

Single purpose vouchers: special rules

4 (1) A voucher is a single purpose voucher if, at the time it is issued, the following are known—

(a) the place of supply of the relevant goods or services, and

(b) that any supply of relevant goods or services falls into a single supply category (and what that supply category is).

(2) The supply categories are—

(a) supplies chargeable at the rate in force under section 2(1) (standard rate),

(b) supplies chargeable at the rate in force under section 29A (reduced rate),

(c) zero-rated supplies, and

(d) exempt supplies and other supplies that are not taxable supplies.

(3) For the purposes of this paragraph, assume that the supply of relevant goods or services is the provision of relevant goods or services for which the voucher may be accepted as consideration (rather than the supply of relevant goods or services treated as made on the issue or transfer of the voucher).

5 (1) This paragraph applies where a single purpose voucher is accepted as consideration for the provision of relevant goods or services.

(2) The provision of the relevant goods or services is not a supply of goods or services for the purposes of this Act.

(3) But where the person who provides the relevant goods or services (the “provider”) is not the person who issued the voucher (the “issuer”), for the purposes of this Act the provider is to be treated as having made a supply of those goods or services to the issuer.

Multi-purpose vouchers: special rules

6 A voucher is a multi-purpose voucher if it is not a single purpose voucher.

7 (1) Any consideration for the issue or subsequent transfer of a multi-purpose voucher is to be disregarded for the purposes of this Act.

(2) The paragraph 3 supply made on the issue or subsequent transfer of a multi-purpose voucher is to be treated as not being a supply within section 26(2).

8 (1) Where a multi-purpose voucher is accepted as consideration for the provision of relevant goods or services, for the purposes of this Act—

(a) The provision of the relevant goods or services is to be treated as a supply, and

(b) the value of the supply treated as having been made by paragraph (a) is determined as follows.

(2) If the consideration for the most recent transfer of the voucher for consideration is known to the supplier, the value of the supply is such amount as, with the addition of the VAT chargeable on the supply, is equal to that consideration.

(3) If the consideration for the most recent transfer of the voucher for consideration is not known to the supplier, the value of the supply is such amount as, with the addition of the VAT chargeable on the supply, is equal to the face value of the voucher.

(4) The “face value” of a voucher is the monetary value stated on or recorded in—

(a) the voucher, or

(b) the terms and conditions governing the use of the voucher.

Intermediaries

9 (1) This paragraph applies where—

(a) a voucher is issued or transferred by an agent who acts in their own name, and

(b) the paragraph 3 supply is a supply of services to which section 47(3) would apply (apart from this paragraph).

(2) Section 47(3) does not apply.

(3) The paragraph 3 supply is treated as both a supply to the agent and a supply by the agent.

10 Nothing in this Schedule affects the application of this Act to any services provided, by a person who issues or transfers a voucher, in addition to the issue or transfer of the voucher.

Composite transactions

11 (1) This paragraph applies where, as part of a composite transaction—

(a) goods or services are supplied to a person, and

(b) a voucher is issued or transferred to that person.

(2) If the total consideration for the transaction is not different, or not significantly different, from what it would be if the voucher were not issued or transferred, the paragraph 3 supply is to be treated as being made for no consideration.7

(6) In regulation 38ZA(2) of the Value Added Tax Regulations 1995 (S.I. 1995/2518), in the definition of “cash refund”, after “Act” insert “or a voucher falling within Schedule 10B to the Act”.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

54. VALUE ADDED TAX (GROUPS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the eligibility of individuals and partnerships to be treated as members of a group for the purposes of value added tax.

55. ALCOHOLIC LIQUOR DUTIES (RATES)

Resolved,

That—

(1) The Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 62(1A) (rates of duty on cider) in paragraph (a) (rate of duty on sparkling cider of a strength exceeding 5.5%), for “£279.46” substitute “£288.10”.

(3) For Part 1 of the table in Schedule 1 substitute—
“PART 1

WINE OR MADE-WINE OF A STRENGTH NOT EXCEEDING 22%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of wine or made-wine</th>
<th>Rates of duty per hectolitre £</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wine or made-wine of a strength not exceeding 4%</td>
<td>91.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine or made-wine of a strength exceeding 4% but not exceeding 5.5%</td>
<td>126.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine or made-wine of a strength exceeding 5.5% but not exceeding 15% and not being sparkling</td>
<td>297.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkling wine or sparkling made-wine of a strength exceeding 5.5% but less than 8.5%</td>
<td>288.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkling wine or sparkling made-wine of a strength of at least 8.5% but not exceeding 15%</td>
<td>381.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine or made-wine of a strength exceeding 15% but not exceeding 22%</td>
<td>396.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(4) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force on 1 February 2019.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

56. EXCISE DUTY ON MID-STRENGTH CIDER

Resolved,

(1) The Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 62B (cider labelled as strong cider)—

(a) putting standard or mid-strength cider in a container which is up-labelled as a container of strong cider;
(b) causing a container in which there is standard or mid-strength cider to be up-labelled as a container of strong cider;
(c) putting standard cider in a container which is up-labelled as a container of mid-strength cider; or
(d) causing a container in which there is standard cider to be up-labelled as a container of mid-strength cider,”.

(e) in subsection (4)—

(i) in paragraph (a), for “not exceeding 7.5 per cent” substitute “of less than 6.9 per cent”,
(ii) omit the “and” at the end of that paragraph, and
(iii) after paragraph (a), insert—

“(aa) “mid-strength cider” means cider which is not sparkling and is of a strength of not less than 6.9 per cent but not exceeding 7.5 per cent; and”,

(f) in subsection (5), in the opening words, after “up-labelled” insert “as a container of strong cider”; and

(g) after subsection (6), insert—

“(7) For the purposes of this section a container is up-labelled as a container of mid-strength cider if there is anything on—

(a) the container itself,
(b) a label or leaflet attached to or used with the container, or
(c) any packaging used for or in association with the container, which states or tends to suggest that the strength of any liquor in that container falls within the mid-strength cider strength range.

(8) For the purposes of subsection (7), a strength falls within the mid-strength cider strength range if it is not less than 6.9 per cent but does not exceed 7.5 per cent.

(9) Where liquor is no longer in a container which is an up-labelled container, and it falls within subsection (1)(b) and within subsection (1A)(b), then it is deemed to be cider of the strength range stated or suggested by the labelling for the up-labelled container in which it was first contained.

(10) For the purposes of subsection (9)—

(a) an “up-labelled container” means—

(i) a container which is up-labelled as a container of strong cider as mentioned in subsection (1)(b),

(ii) a container which is up-labelled as a container of mid-strength cider as mentioned in subsection (1A)(b), and

(b) references to the labelling for any container are references to anything on—

(i) the container itself,

(ii) a label or leaflet attached to or used with the container, or

(iii) any packaging used for or in association with the container.”

(4) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force on 1 February 2019.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

57. TOBACCO PRODUCTS DUTY (RATES)

Resolved,

(1) The Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 is amended as follows.
(2) For the table in Schedule 1 substitute—

"Table

1. Cigarettes An amount equal to the higher of—
(a) 16.5% of the retail price plus £228.29 per thousand cigarettes, or
(b) £293.95 per thousand cigarettes.
2. Cigars £284.76 per kilogram
3. Hand-rolling tobacco £234.65 per kilogram
4. Other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco £125.20 per kilogram"

(3) The amendment made by this Resolution comes into force at 6pm on 29 October 2018.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

58. TOBACCO FOR HEATING

Resolved.

That provision may be made about the charging of excise duty on tobacco for heating.

59. VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY

Resolved.

That provision may be made about the rates of vehicle excise duty.

60. TAXIS CAPABLE OF ZERO EMISSIONS

Resolved.

That provision may be made for the rates of vehicle excise duty given by paragraph 1GE(2) and (4) of Schedule 1 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 not to apply to a taxi capable of zero emissions.

61. HGV ROAD USER LEVY

Resolved.

That—

(a) in subsection (3)—
(i) in paragraph (b), for “under section 7” substitute “as a result of an entitlement arising under section 7(2)”, and
(ii) after paragraph (b) insert—
"(c) where a person receives a rebate of levy in respect of a vehicle as a result of an entitlement arising under section 7(2A), the person is treated as not having paid levy in respect of the vehicle for the period starting with the first day of the month after the month in which the application for a rebate was made and ending with the end of the levy period.”,

(b) after subsection (3), insert—
"(4) For the purposes of subsection (3)(c), a month starts on the day of the month on which the levy period started.”

(6) In Schedule 1 (rates of HGV road user levy)—

(a) for paragraph 1 substitute—
"1(1) Table 1 applies to a heavy goods vehicle that meets Euro 6 emissions standards.

(2) Table 1A applies to a heavy goods vehicle that does not meet Euro 6 emissions standards.

(3) Tables 1 and 1A set out the rates of levy for each of the Bands given by Tables 2 to 5 and by paragraph 4;“;

(b) in paragraph 5, after paragraph (b) insert—
"(c) a heavy goods vehicle meets Euro 6 emissions standards if it complies with the emission limits set out in Annex 1 of Regulation (EC) No. 595/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18th June 2009 on type approval of motor vehicles and engines with respect to emissions from heavy duty vehicles (Euro VI) and on access to repair and maintenance information.”;

(c) for Table 1 substitute—

"Table 1: Vehicles Meeting Euro 6 Emissions Standards—Rates For Each Band

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Daily rate</th>
<th>Weekly rate</th>
<th>Monthly rate</th>
<th>Half-yearly rate</th>
<th>Yearly rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>£1.53</td>
<td>£3.83</td>
<td>£7.65</td>
<td>£45.90</td>
<td>£76.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>£1.89</td>
<td>£4.73</td>
<td>£9.45</td>
<td>£56.70</td>
<td>£94.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>£4.32</td>
<td>£10.80</td>
<td>£21.60</td>
<td>£129.60</td>
<td>£216.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>£6.30</td>
<td>£15.75</td>
<td>£31.50</td>
<td>£189.00</td>
<td>£315.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>£9.00</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£57.60</td>
<td>£345.60</td>
<td>£576.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>£9.00</td>
<td>£36.45</td>
<td>£72.90</td>
<td>£437.40</td>
<td>£729.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>£9.00</td>
<td>£45.00</td>
<td>£90.00</td>
<td>£540.00</td>
<td>£900.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B(T)</td>
<td>£2.43</td>
<td>£6.08</td>
<td>£12.15</td>
<td>£72.90</td>
<td>£121.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C(T)</td>
<td>£5.58</td>
<td>£13.95</td>
<td>£27.90</td>
<td>£167.40</td>
<td>£279.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D(T)</td>
<td>£8.10</td>
<td>£20.25</td>
<td>£40.50</td>
<td>£243.00</td>
<td>£405.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E(T)</td>
<td>£9.00</td>
<td>£37.35</td>
<td>£74.70</td>
<td>£448.20</td>
<td>£747.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1A: Vehicles Not Meeting Euro 6 Emissions Standards—Rates For Each Band

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Daily rate</th>
<th>Weekly rate</th>
<th>Monthly rate</th>
<th>Half-yearly rate</th>
<th>Yearly rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>£2.04</td>
<td>£5.10</td>
<td>£10.20</td>
<td>£61.20</td>
<td>£102.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>£2.52</td>
<td>£6.30</td>
<td>£12.60</td>
<td>£75.60</td>
<td>£126.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>£5.76</td>
<td>£14.40</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£172.80</td>
<td>£288.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>£8.40</td>
<td>£21.00</td>
<td>£42.00</td>
<td>£252.00</td>
<td>£420.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>£10.00</td>
<td>£38.40</td>
<td>£76.80</td>
<td>£460.80</td>
<td>£768.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>£10.00</td>
<td>£48.60</td>
<td>£97.20</td>
<td>£583.20</td>
<td>£972.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>£10.00</td>
<td>£60.00</td>
<td>£120.00</td>
<td>£720.00</td>
<td>£1,200.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B(T)</td>
<td>£3.24</td>
<td>£8.10</td>
<td>£16.20</td>
<td>£97.20</td>
<td>£162.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C(T)</td>
<td>£7.44</td>
<td>£18.60</td>
<td>£37.20</td>
<td>£223.20</td>
<td>£372.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D(T)</td>
<td>£10.00</td>
<td>£27.00</td>
<td>£54.00</td>
<td>£324.00</td>
<td>£540.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E(T)</td>
<td>£10.00</td>
<td>£49.80</td>
<td>£99.60</td>
<td>£597.60</td>
<td>£996.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(7) The HGV Road User Levy (Rate for Prescribed Vehicles) Regulations 2018 (S.I. 2018/417) are revoked.

(8) In section 19 of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 (rebates)—

(a) in subsection (3), after paragraph (g) insert—
“(h) a relevant application for a vehicle licence for the vehicle has been received by the Secretary of State,”;

(b) after subsection (3ZA) insert—

“(3ZB) An application for a vehicle licence is a relevant application for the purposes of subsection (3)(h) if—

(a) there is an unexpired licence for the vehicle in respect of which the application is made,

(b) when the unexpired licence was taken out, the vehicle was chargeable to HGV road user levy under section 5 of the HGV Road User Levy Act 2013 at a rate applicable to a vehicle that does not meet Euro 6 emissions standards, and

(c) the vehicle now meets those standards, and an application for a rebate of HGV road user levy has been made under section 7 of that Act as a result of an entitlement arising under subsection (2A) of that section.”,

(c) in subsection (7), after “rebate conditions” insert “(other than the condition in subsection (3)(h))”, and

(d) after subsection (7) insert—

“(7A) Where the rebate condition in subsection (3)(h) is satisfied in relation to a licence, the licence ceases to be in force immediately before the first day of the period for which the relevant person is treated as not having paid levy in respect of the vehicle as a result of a section 19(3)(c) of the HGV Road User Levy Act 2013.”

(9) The amendments and revocation made by paragraphs (1) to (7) are to be treated as having effect in relation to HGV road user levy that—

(a) becomes due on or after 1 February 2019, and

(b) is paid on or after that date.

(10) The amendments made by paragraph (8) are to be treated as having effect in relation to licences taken out on or after 1 February 2019.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

**62. AIR PASSENGER DUTY (RATES)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rates of air passenger duty.

**63. REMOTE GAMING DUTY (RATE)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rate of remote gaming duty to 21%.

**64. GAMING DUTY (ACCOUNTING PERIODS ETC)**

Resolved,

That the following provision relating to gaming duty may be made—

(a) provision about accounting periods by reference to which the duty is chargeable,

(b) provision allowing losses to be carried forward, and

(c) provision about payments on account.

**65. CLIMATE CHANGE LEVY (EXEMPTION FOR MINERALOGICAL AND METALLURGICAL PROCESSES)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending paragraph 12A of Schedule 6 to the Finance Act 2000.

**66. LANDFILL TAX (RATE)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the rates of landfill tax.

**67. INHERITANCE TAX (RESIDENCE NIL-RATE BAND)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending sections 8E(1), 8FA(2)(b) and (5), 8FE(9) and 8J(6) of the Inheritance Tax Act 1984.

**68. SOFT DRINKS INDUSTRY LEVY (PENALTIES)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Schedules 10 and 11 to the Finance (No.3) Act 2010 for the purposes of soft drinks industry levy.

**69. SOFT DRINKS INDUSTRY LEVY (ISLE OF MAN)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the rates of landfill tax.

**70. CARBON EMISSIONS TAX**

Resolved,

That provision may be made for a new tax to be charged in respect of emissions of carbon dioxide and certain other gases arising from activities regulated under the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Regulations 2012 (S.I. 2012/2038).

**71. TIME LIMITS FOR ASSESSMENTS ETC**

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the time limits, in cases involving offshore matters or offshore transfers, for—

(a) assessments to income tax or capital gains tax, and

(b) proceedings for underpaid inheritance tax.

**72. SECURITY DEPOSITS (CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY SCHEME, CORPORATION TAX AND PAYE)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made—

(a) about the giving of security for the payment of amounts that a person is or may be liable to pay under Chapter 3 of Part 3 of the Finance Act 2004,

(b) about the giving of security for the payment of corporation tax that a company is or may be liable to pay, and

(c) amending section 684(4A) of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.

**73. DOUBLE TAXATION (DISPUTE RESOLUTION)**

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the resolution of disputes relating to double taxation arrangements.
74. INTERNATIONAL TAX ENFORCEMENT (DISCLOSABLE ARRANGEMENTS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the remedies available in respect of payments of unlawful advance corporation tax.

75. UNLAWFUL ADVANCE CORPORATION TAX

Resolved,

That provision may be made about tax returns delivered otherwise than in pursuance of a requirement to do so.

76. VOLUNTARY TAX RETURNS

Resolved,

That provision may be made about—

(a) rates of interest applicable by virtue of section 178 of the Finance Act 1989, and

(b) interest payable by virtue of sections 101 to 103 of the Finance Act 2009.

77. INTEREST

Resolved,

That provision may be made about—

(a) provision in connection with any reference in relevant tax legislation on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom under—


78. REGULATORY CAPITAL SECURITIES AND HYBRID INSTRUMENTS

Resolved,

That provision may be made about loan relationships whose only significant equity feature is the entitlement of the debtor to defer or cancel payments of interest.

79. MINOR AMENDMENTS IN CONSEQUENCE OF EU WITHDRAWAL

Question put,

That—

(1) Provision may be made conferring on the Treasury a power, exercisable at all times after Royal Assent, to make—

(a) provision for the purpose of maintaining the effect of any relevant tax legislation on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU (and, accordingly, on the United Kingdom ceasing to be an EEA state),

(b) provision for the purpose of maintaining the effect of any relevant tax legislation on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU (and, accordingly, on the United Kingdom ceasing to be an EEA state),

(c) provision in connection with any reference in relevant tax legislation to the Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979, the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 or the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979, and

(d) provision amending paragraph 2(4) of Schedule 5 to the Finance Act 1997 for the purposes of removing the reference to EU legislation, and

(e) (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision amending section 173 of the Finance Act 2006 to permit the disclosure of information to the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs by other public authorities and by the Commissioners to persons outside the United Kingdom.

(2) In this Resolution—

(a) “relevant tax” means any tax (including stamp duty) except value added tax, any duty of customs, or any excise duty under the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979, and the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979, and

(b) “relevant tax legislation” means any enactment relating to a relevant tax.

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 295.

Division No. 254]

AYES

Resol...
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halla, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloberne, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Sir Oliver
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pater, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, rh Dr Julian
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, rh Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniuzzi, Tonía
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Olvie
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blakemore, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brae, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Dr Dan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Day, Martin
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dochart-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dow, Peter
Drew, Dr Dan
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
provisions designed in general to afford relief from taxation, and (including charges having retrospective effect) that may arise from paragraph 5 of Schedule 2 to the Climate Change Act 2008.

That it is expedient to authorise—

(a) any incidental or consequential charges to any duty or tax (including charges having retrospective effect) that may arise from provisions designed in general to afford relief from taxation, and

(b) any incidental or consequential provision (including provision having retrospective effect) relating to provision authorised by any other resolution.

FINANCE (MONEY)

That, for the purposes of any Act of the present Session relating to finance, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State in preparing for the introduction of a scheme for charges to be imposed for the allocation of allowances under paragraph 5 of Schedule 2 to the Climate Change Act 2008.
FINANCE (No. 3) BILL
Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the national debt and the public revenue, and to make further provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 5 November, and to be printed (Bill 282).

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There are sad reports that the Minister for Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has resigned as a direct result of the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Budget. Will someone on the Treasury Bench confirm whether that is true? If it is, I want to put on record my support for the Minister’s work and to thank her for the job she has done. Will the Chancellor confirm to the House whether this is the first time that a member of the Government has resigned during the votes on a Budget as a direct result of a Chancellor’s policies?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): As the hon. Lady is well aware, that is not a point of order for the Chair, but it is now on the record for all to know.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Tuesday, the Home Office told the Home Affairs Committee that there would be additional checks by employers on EU citizens in the event a no-deal Brexit. However, the Home Secretary appears to have told the media yesterday that there would not be any such checks and that there would be a transition. Today it appears that No. 10 has told the media both that there will be no checks, and also that free movement is starting straight away, and that planning is continuing so nothing is certain. Have you heard anything from the Home Office about whether a Minister will come to the House to clarify this chaotic mess? With five months to go, will you use your offices to ensure that somebody either from the Home Office or from No. 10 tells us what on earth is going on?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are a couple of things to say. First, that matter is now on the record, ensuring that everyone is aware of it. Secondly, the power lies with the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee to invite Ministers, the Home Secretary or whoever back before the Committee to make a clarification. People will have noted what is being said, and I am sure that we will get an explanation before long.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is not the first time that the Home Affairs Committee has received misleading, contradictory evidence from Home Office Ministers. It is deeply unacceptable that information is not being clarified by a statement to the House or in a letter to the Committee, but appearing in mysterious email communications with outside organisations and to the media. What can we do to get a Minister here to explain what on earth is going on at the Home Office?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are obviously many alternative options and avenues to go down, such as an urgent question on Monday. I know that the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee will not leave the matter at that, and I think that different approaches will be being used by Monday.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy-Speaker. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) complained of not having advance sight of the Budget. If my understanding is correct, that is only the convention for the spring statement, not for the Budget. Can you confirm that advance sight has only happened once in 20 years of Budgets, 13 of which were covered by Labour Budgets?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Government decided not to provide an advance copy, so that was a Government decision. What people will believe is the norm, they will believe, but others will say that it is not the norm. For clarification, somebody said on Facebook that the Opposition did not receive a copy but I did, and unfortunately for the person who said that, I am the Chairman of Ways and Means, and the Budget has been delivered to the person in that position for over 100 years. It was not delivered me to personally, but to the office that I hold.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, you have given me some information that I did not know before.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Excellent. At least I can be helpful to the House.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 to 7 together.

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

Companies

That the draft Companies (Directors’ Report) and Limited Liability Partnerships (Energy and Carbon Report) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 July, be approved.

Exiting the European Union

That the draft European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations, which were laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

European Communities

That the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Economic Partnership Agreements and Trade Agreement) (Eastern and Southern Africa States, Southern African Development Community States, Ghana and Ecuador) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

Defence

That the draft Armed Forces (Specified Aviation and Marine Functions) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.
Excluding the European Union (Financial Services and Markets)

That the draft EEA Passport Rights (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provisions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.

Education

That the draft Further Education Bodies (Insolvency) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—([Michelle Donelan.])

Question agreed to.

Petition

Women affected by changes to the state pension age

5.48 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of residents of Newport East, but first I want to acknowledge the women born in the 1950s in my constituency and across the UK for their resolute efforts in fighting against the injustice and unfairness that they have faced. I thank those who attended our public meetings in Newport on women’s pension changes and who signed this petition.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Newport East,

Declares that the 1995 Pensions Act has been implemented unfairly, with little/no personal notice (1995/2011 Pension Acts), faster than promised (2011 Pension Act), and no time to alternative plans; further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences; and further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with a lack of appropriate notification.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the All Party Parliamentary Group on State Pension Inequality for Women to make fair transitional arrangements for all women affected who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age (SPA).

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002284]

Leaving the EU: Central Counterparty Clearing

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—([Michelle Donelan.])

5.50 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The title of this debate may encourage hon. Members to flee the Chamber, but I encourage them to leave via the House of Commons Library, which can explain why central counterparty clearing services are so incredibly central to the infrastructure that underpins business, corporate finance and the nature of our economy, and why Brexit could potentially have a significant effect on such services.

To give a sense of scale, the British economy is worth about $4 trillion. LCH, one of the biggest central counterparty clearing services, is owned by the London stock exchange, and this year alone it has cleared $812 trillion-worth of derivative contracts—largely interest rate swaps. That is a mind-boggling sum of money, and I am raising this issue today because it is an internationally important liquidity pool. The UK specialises in this facility, but with the UK leaving the European Union, the jurisdiction in which these CCP operations take place could well be fragmented, which could have a destabilising effect on the operation of central counterparty clearing services.

The question is: if we crash out of the European Union, or if we do not get the right sort of regulatory framework, what will happen to those trillions of dollars’ worth of derivative contracts? This is one of the most significant cliff-edge issues in Brexit, and it has not had anywhere near enough attention or coverage.

By way of background, I will provide an example of what a CCP operation does and what it clears. Imagine a construction company that is getting a big loan from a bank to build a housing estate, or whatever. That loan is quite a big liability for the business, and often the loan will come with a variable interest rate. In order to manage the liability, the construction company might want to swap that variable interest rate for something a little more predictable, a little more stable—perhaps a fixed-rate interest arrangement. Such interest rate swaps are now a common or garden part of corporate business finance. If we are talking about stability in the economy, such products, though complicated, are often the wiring behind the scenes. They really are important to how we stabilise our economy.

In recent times, central counterparty clearing facilities have developed to make sure that companies do not necessarily have to make these arrangements bilaterally with one another, because they can clear them through a central fund that has an insurance buffer arrangement in case of default on such contracts. Companies such as LCH can go through a number of layers in order to cope with the default. We saw a recent default scenario in Norway, where an energy trader was overexposed and a CCP arrangement absorbed much of that default shock and prevented contagion that could have had wider ramifications around the world. This certainly operated in respect of Lehman Brothers and others in the financial crisis. Since then, policymakers worldwide have recognised that CCP is a really important pillar of our financial stability mechanisms. So these are important
insurance policies and this is an international pool of liquidity, and London and the UK are right at the heart of those operations.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is drawing attention to an important set of issues of which I was not fully aware. He would probably agree that we cannot have an “It’ll be alright on the night” approach from the Government to such complex arrangements—we need surety on them. Was he interested, as I was, to see Commissioner Barnier talking earlier about how there had been misleading press reports about a deal on financial services and about many of these matters being close to being agreed, and saying that that was not the case?

**Mr Leslie:** My hon. Friend rightly takes us to the more contemporary story about what is happening with these, because Brexit has put everything in limbo. Will these CCP operations be able to continue to service the vast majority of euro-denominated interest rate swaps or derivative products? The European Union had been developing new supervisory arrangements that would have included the UK. Brexit came along and of course those have all now been put into abeyance because the UK may be taken out of those jurisdictions. Time has ticked on and we are now five months, perhaps less, away from the moment of change, yet we still do not have any certainty about what will happen. However, we have heard various rumours.

Last week, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, highlighted £41 trillion-worth of outstanding contracts that could be forcibly voided—that could fall out of legal certainty—if we do not get some sort of arrangement put in place. Earlier in the week, EU Commissioner and Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis indicated that the EU might allow the UK CCPs after Brexit to operate on a temporary basis, with some strict conditionality. Of course we saw the report in *The Times* today that perhaps in the negotiations there was some sort of sense in which UK financial services companies, including these CCPs, would be able to operate on an equivalence basis, which is not as good as the arrangements we have, where we are around the table and able to make the rules on regulations. We would be a rule taker, but of course we may be allowed access to European markets—and, potentially, vice versa. The danger with that is that it is precarious and it could be switched off at a moment’s notice if policymakers ticked on and we are now five months, perhaps less, away from the moment of change, yet we still do not have any certainty about what will happen. However, we have heard various rumours.

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, today Commissioner Barnier poured a big old dose of cold water all over that, saying, “You should not believe everything you read in the paper.” He reiterated that it was really in the hands of the EU to decide whether equivalence continued. This would not be an ideal situation at all, and the risk is that we would need to see CCP clearing services develop rapidly in other jurisdictions in Europe. Of course the Americans will have their arrangements, but that could start to undermine the centrality of the UK. That would be a great pity, because the UK has expertise and a relatively good regulatory approach, working with our European colleagues.

So the main question I want to put to the Minister is: what is the Government’s attitude to the future, long-term, stable, permanent regulation environment? Are we going to align ourselves closely or in harmony with the EU regulatory framework for central counterparty clearing arrangements? If that is the case, it would be useful to know that that is British Government policy at this stage, because that might then enable something to be built on equivalence. We could possibly move to a position in which the UK still has a say in the regulatory arrangements.

In my view, the public should be given a chance to think again about this whole thing and, if they want, there should be a people’s vote so that the option to remain is still viable. Nothing has been decided that should prevent that from happening. If we are to leave the European Union, it would not be a good thing to do so and put all these things up in the air. We should not fragment the financial safety regulatory arrangements and potentially put businesses, jobs and livelihoods at risk.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I used to do this sort of thing for a living as a derivatives lawyer, although that is not something to which I own up very often these days. I was working in the City at the time of preparations for the millennium bug, and when the euro came in I was involved in cleaning up the mess after the Barings collapse. With the millennium bug in particular, people said afterwards that it was a big fuss about nothing and that it was totally alarmist and exaggerated for people to say that it was going to cause chaos. What they did not realise was how much work had to go on behind the scenes to make sure that that chaos did not happen. There is a real danger of complacency with situations like the current one, with people thinking that it will all sort itself out. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Mr Leslie:** I do agree, and I do not think that the work is being done. Frankly, there should be more leadership. We are in a rudderless situation right now. We have a lot of regulators—the Bank of England, the European Securities and Markets Authority and others—but they are of course subservient to the political policy makers, and although I hope that those policy makers are apprised of these issues and know the scale, I am not that confident that they are or that it is high up their agenda. I am not sure that I have heard the Prime Minister talk about these issues, let alone the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Perhaps the Minister will be able to enlighten us on that.

I shall come to an eventual conclusion by explaining why there might be a number of problems. Firms are currently discussing a lot of contracts that are not yet cleared. If we do not have the option of central counterparty clearing—in particular from the European side in respect of whether they can access London—what stability risks will be generated in those scenarios? Will we lose liquidity? If we do, will we see costs going up for businesses? When costs go up for businesses, will they be passed on to customers? That would have a drag effect on the worldwide economy.

The issue for those contracts that are already cleared—that are already in existence—is whether they will still be extant after 29 March, because if a whole load of existing contracts are in place, whether in Europe or wherever, many will have clauses that require notice to be given if their legal validity is due to expire. It could be six months or nine months, but we are now certainly...
coming into the period in which the holders of those contracts will have to start to give notice and to say, “We are not certain that these existing financial contracts will be viable or in place, because of the risk of falling into legal no man’s land after 29 March.” There is a clear and present risk to the stability not just of our economy or Europe’s economy, but of the worldwide economy. Although this can seem a very dry topic, everybody should stay focused on the hundreds of trillions of pounds-worth of value that might have an effect on the wider economy.

Will the Minister say what we are going to do to come to a swift conclusion—certainly within the next few weeks—on this issue? I know that the UK has made an offer to the EU to allow temporary access to UK firms. The question is obviously whether that is going to be reciprocal, but if we are to offer that, are we going to legislate for it and put that guarantee into law? That could be done right now. I really want to find out the Treasury’s plan. Do we know that the Government care and are taking an interest in the stability of the UK and EU economies, and in businesses, jobs and the livelihoods of all our constituents, who will undoubtedly be affected by this issue?

6.4 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) on securing this debate and thank him for what he said. He set out very clearly the risks and the need for clarification. I am very happy to give him the answers to the questions that he has posed in his thoughtful and helpful speech.

I, first, wish to acknowledge the issue of no deal and to clarify from the outset that the Government firmly believe that it is in the interests of the EU and the UK to strike a deal. That remains the clear goal on both sides and we are confident that that will be achieved. I reassure the hon. Gentleman and the whole House that an enormous amount of work and dialogue is going on at all levels in order to understand the issues that exist on both sides.

Our proposal for the future UK-EU relationship in financial services seeks to be both negotiable and ambitious. It is founded on preserving the economic benefits of the most important financial services traded between us and on ensuring stable institutional processes for governing the relationship into the future. That is the best way to protect financial stability and open markets, and it is in the interests of businesses and consumers on both sides. Just for clarification, under our plan, we would build on the EU’s existing equivalence regimes but expand their scope to recognise business activities that are in the interests of both the EU and the UK but not covered by the existing regime.

Mr Leslie: Just stepping back from the specifics, on the policy stance of the UK Government, are we intending to remain in lock-step with our European neighbours in terms of the regulatory approach that we take—as a matter of philosophy? The Americans would perhaps like us to depart from that, but it feels to me important, for our existing market access, that a commitment is given to preserve some of the harmonies that we already have.

John Glen: I am very happy to respond to that point. We are seeking to recognise that we start from a common starting point. What we acknowledged in the White Paper in July is that there is an appetite on both sides—on the part of the UK and the EU—to retain the autonomy around their supervisory bodies. But we need to develop a strong bilateral relationship in the future should either side wish to innovate and deviate from the existing alignment, so that we can then have a strong bilateral dialogue on how to resolve any disputed areas.

However, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are not seeking to differentiate ourselves and to become a bargain-basement regulatory environment. We secure such significant investment in the City of London because of the world-class nature of our regulatory environment. In fact, we have led the way in many of the dialogues over the years within the EU. So our aspiration is an ambitious one and it is based on a strong trading dynamic with the EU into the future.

I want to move into the specifics, because the hon. Gentleman has raised some significant and sensible points. We are prepared for all outcomes, including for no deal. The Government recognise that, in the event of a no deal, this is a critical issue. We are not complacent and he has set out the stakes clearly, which are so high for jobs and livelihoods up and down this country.

As the Financial Policy Committee has said, £69 trillion-worth of centrally cleared derivative contracts could be affected. Central counterparties, as the hon. Gentleman set out, are financial institutions that firms use to reduce counterparty risk. CCPs do that by standing between the parties of a trade, becoming the buyer to every seller and the seller to every buyer. That guarantees that transactions will be honoured if the other party defaults.

CCPs are central to the UK and global financial system. They reduce risk and ultimately improve the efficiency and resilience of the system as a whole. Any disruption to this system would affect large banks and institutional investors, which use these clearing services when hedging their risks.

There are key issues for CCPs and their members. First, when the UK leaves the European Union, EU CCPs will not be recognised to provide their clearing services to UK firms, and vice versa. Secondly, there is legal uncertainty about whether EU clearing members can continue to meet their contractual obligations to UK CCPs. This disruption is particularly acute for EU firms using UK CCPs. The European Central Bank estimates that UK CCPs clear approximately 90% of euro-denominated interest rate swaps used by euro area banks. The only industry mitigant available would be to close out or transfer the contracts that EU clearing members have with UK CCPs before March 2019. But as the FPC has said, the movement of such a large volume of contracts in a short timeframe would be costly and would strain capacity in the derivatives market.

The importance of the financial services sector to the UK and the EU has already been noted in this debate, and it is critical that we acknowledge that and respond to these challenges wholeheartedly. I spend my time as a Minister promoting, preserving and standing up for the benefits of the sector for the whole United Kingdom—not just the City of London, but areas such as Bristol, Nottingham and Edinburgh. The sector is a British
asset as much as a European one. This Government remain committed to agreeing a close future relationship on financial services with the EU that preserves the mutual benefits of our uniquely integrated markets while protecting financial stability, consumers, businesses and taxpayers across the UK and the EU, and this relationship must take into account that the UK is a global hub for these clearing services.

As I said, it remains unlikely that the UK will leave the EU without an agreement, but we are prepared for all outcomes, so I will now go into some detail on the no-deal situation. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we have committed to unilateral action to resolve the risk of disruption as far as possible on the UK side. Colleagues will be aware that the Government have already laid draft secondary legislation that will establish a temporary recognition regime for CCPs. That regime will allow non-UK CCPs to continue to provide clearing services to UK firms for up to three years while those CCPs apply for recognition in the UK.

My noble Friend Lord Bates debated the statutory instrument through the Lords on Tuesday, and a debate is arranged for a Delegated Legislation Committee in the Commons next Monday—the pack is ready for me to go home to Salisbury with so I can prepare—and, as has been highlighted, any successful mitigant to the clearing services problem requires action by both UK and EU authorities.

I welcome the announcement by European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis, I think, on Tuesday this week, that the EU will, if necessary to address the financial stability risks arising from the UK leaving the EU, act to ensure continued access to UK CCPs on a temporary basis. It is right that EU authorities will have to set out further details on their plans, and we would welcome that, but this announcement is a positive step in ensuring the stability of the financial system for the UK and the EU.

The Government are committed to working with our EU partners to identify and address risks relating to the UK’s exit from the EU. We are supportive of continued engagement and co-operation between our regulators. This is continuing, including through the technical working group convened by the ECB since April with the Bank of England, and is evidence of our shared interests in these issues. I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman has said about the lack of detail coming out. I think that is a condition of the Commission’s negotiating stance. We respect that, but will continue to engage and to observe what is going on.

There are suggestions from some in the EU that UK CCPs pose a risk to the EU’s financial stability. That is the impetus behind the proposal to revise the framework for supervising third-country CCPs, including the so-called location policy. UK CCPs are truly global institutions, and we recognise that there are legitimate questions about the future supervision of UK CCPs with EU members once we leave the EU. We should take a stable and co-operative approach to the supervision and regulation of globally active firms. This should include the ability for regulators in different jurisdictions to defer to each other based on comparable rules—a principle that the EU and the UK have committed to at the international level. Some of the measures currently under consideration by the EU undermine this principle and cannot be seen as an enhancement of the existing equivalence process. In particular, a location policy would be a poor solution that would unnecessarily harm investment in Europe, increase costs for European firms and ultimately undermine financial stability. We are making that case, and I am sure that those who use CCPs will be making the same case.

I thank the hon. Member for Nottingham East for raising, in a very thorough way, some very legitimate issues at the core of these negotiations. I want to reassure him, and the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who contributed to the debate, that the Government are not complacent on these matters. I am acutely conscious of the large number of statutory instruments that I will be taking through over the coming weeks. Dialogue is continuing at all levels as we seek to reassure the City of London, and the financial services industry across the United Kingdom, that the Government are prepared for all outcomes, though working determinedly and passionately for the best outcome and a good deal that recognises the centrality of financial services to the UK economy.

Question put and agreed to.

6.16 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 5 November 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leasehold Charges

1. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to protect existing leaseholders from high leasehold charges. [907431]

4. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to protect existing leaseholders from high leasehold charges. [907435]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Before I answer these questions, I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in offering our condolences to the family and friends of Sir Jeremy Heywood, who passed away at the weekend. He demonstrated all that is precious in our civil service through the way in which he supported Governments of all colours, and the manner in which he supported four Prime Ministers. He showed leadership, real focus and ingenuity in dealing with challenging issues, as well as calmness and a real sense of humour. I know that he will be missed by everyone on both sides of the House.

Unfair leasehold practices have no place in a modern housing market, and neither do excessive ground rents that exploit consumers. I will be making clear to developers at a roundtable meeting later this week the need for the industry to provide greater support to existing leaseholders.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Secretary of State for his response, and I would like to associate myself with his remarks about the sad death of Sir Jeremy Heywood.

Will the Secretary of State explain how the steps he has outlined will help my constituent, Linda Barnes, who owns a flat that is valued at £80,000 and pays an onerous ground rent of £400 a year on it? What help will he give so that such flats can become attractive to buyers again?

James Brokenshire: I am conscious of some of the bad practices in the leasehold market, which is why I will be meeting the industry later this week to underline the need for redress and for solutions to be offered to people who have in some cases been mis-sold. I certainly take this seriously. I have also written to the Competition and Markets Authority and to the Solicitors Regulatory Authority, in the knowledge that there are serious questions about some of the practices involved, in order to ensure that we are taking action on a number of fronts in response to the challenges that the hon. Lady rightly highlights.

Liz Twist: Three weeks ago, members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee held a roundtable for leaseholders at the start of our inquiry. They told us about the problem of escalating ground rents that trap them in homes that they can no longer sell. They made it clear that they wanted existing leaseholds to be ended; does the Secretary of State agree with them?

James Brokenshire: We are working with the Law Commission around greater enfranchisement in order to bring leaseholds to an end. I am also conscious that at least one provider in the market has offered some means of redress and of dealing with some of the issues, but the point is that we need to go further, and that is what I shall be challenging representatives of the industry on when I meet them later this week.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will be grateful to the Secretary of State for saying that he is going to commit to doing all he can for residential leaseholders on existing leases, which are abusive. It is still not too late for the Competition and Markets Authority to declare some of those leases to be so unfair as to be unenforceable.

I hope that, in time, the Secretary of State will meet representatives of the industry, along with the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the Leaseholder Association—and perhaps the Chairman of the Select Committee, which is having hearings this afternoon—and that the campaigners and the industry will all meet together so that the Secretary of State is not hearing one thing in one ear and another thing in the other. We have to represent the leaseholders.

James Brokenshire: I hear my hon. Friend’s message very clearly indeed. We have been provided with a number of examples of egregious practice, and I intend to challenge some of the concerns that have been flagged to me. I am sure that we will continue to have this conversation, but I have noted his points.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Law Commission process grinds on, but what advice can be given in the meantime to constituents who present with the most outrageous charges?

James Brokenshire: Advice is being given by LEASE and others, but this is about transparency and providing more support, which is where the industry has a key role to play. That is why we will be making these points to the industry later this week, as well as looking at where the regulatory aspects might sit.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Leaseholders in several private blocks in Leeds are being asked to pay huge bills to deal with unsafe cladding. The cost is between £10,000 and £28,000 for each leaseholder at
Skyline Apartments, and the total cost of replacing the cladding in the Saxton development could be as high as £8 million. Given that my constituents are being asked to pay money that they do not have to deal with a problem that they did not create, when will the Government stop urging freeholders not to charge leaseholders and actually prevent them from doing so by law?

James Brokenshire: We have taken several steps and put significant pressure on the industry, and that is starting to have an impact as many freeholders take the necessary steps to make buildings safe without passing on the costs to leaseholders, who should not bear them. I am happy to consider the right hon. Gentleman’s specific examples, because we are in direct contact with several different agencies, and indeed with local government about taking enforcement action, to see that work is done.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his answers. I urge the Government to bring in legislation to bar such charges in future, but we would still need to address those who have been unfairly put in this position in the first place. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend to consider not only legislation for the future, but retrospective legislation to address the egregious practices that have taken place.

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, we are consulting on the implementation of a ban on inappropriate leaseholds on homes, which are the core of what we are discussing. Legislation will come forward once we have seen the responses to our technical consultation, and there will obviously be plenty of opportunity for colleagues to debate the matter further.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I start by formally echoing the Secretary of State’s comments about Sir Jeremy Heywood. Many of us were privileged to work with Sir Jeremy, and he was an exceptional civil servant who gave outstanding service to this country. Our deep sympathies are with his wife and family at this time.

As we have heard, many of us have constituents who bought their home but then found that they do not own it and feel ripped off by unfair leasehold contracts. When we hear, repeatedly, that leasehold buyers did not choose their own solicitor, were wrongly told that they could buy their freehold cheaply at any time, or found out later that they had to ask and pay freeholders for permission to own a pet, change their carpets or build a conservatory, the individual cases add up to something bigger. The Government must act, just as with other mis-selling scandals, such as on pensions, mortgages or payment protection insurance. Will the Secretary of State today back an inquiry into this systematic mis-selling to leaseholders?

James Brokenshire: I recognise and appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about Sir Jeremy Heywood. I know that that message will have been heard throughout the House.

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s investigation into leasehold is live, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman recognises the seriousness with which we take the issues that he and others have flagged, and the troubling matters that pertain to some of the practices within the leasehold market. That is why I am taking action.

John Healey: It is not the Select Committee’s action that counts, but the Government’s action, which has been too weak and too slow and, critically, largely overlooks the plight of existing leaseholders. An industry survey shows that six in 10 leaseholders did not even know what being a leaseholder meant until after they had bought, and that nine in 10 regret having bought a leasehold at all. Those are classic signs of mis-selling—it is a national scandal. I will give the Secretary of State another chance: when will he stand up for leaseholders and launch an inquiry into mis-selling?

James Brokenshire: Nobody is ignoring the issue. That is not only why we are legislating to address the inappropriate use of leasehold for new homes, but why I have underlined today the requests that I have made of the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority. We recognise that there are serious issues, which is why we are taking action. We want to ensure that leaseholders’ concerns are heard and fully understood, and that redress can be provided.

Homeless Families: Accommodation Outside Home Borough

2. Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What guidance has he issued to local authorities on accommodating homeless families outside of their home borough.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As usual, I ask people to note my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

In December 2017 we updated the homelessness code of guidance for local authorities, chapter 17 of which makes it clear that, when possible, local authorities should place families as close as possible to where they were previously living.

Ms Buck: There has been a 40% rise in London households being moved out of London by their local authority, and my own experience shows that local authorities are also moving families in unprecedented numbers away from their community, their children’s schools, their workplaces and their support. The code of guidance is clearly not working, so can the Minister tell us unambiguously that local authorities should, under no circumstances, expect children to commute to school from temporary accommodation for two, three or even four hours every day?

Mrs Wheeler: I do understand the particular problem that the hon. Lady is having in Westminster, but it is the London boroughs. We have been clear that placing families out of borough should be a last resort, and we have now committed £40 million to a London collaborative project that will ensure that families are placed in temporary accommodation close to home. We also recently launched the £20 million private rented sector access fund to support those who are homeless, or who are at risk of becoming homeless, to access sustainable accommodation.
Finally, our specialist homelessness advisers are working closely with London boroughs in particular to provide support to limit the number of out-of-borough moves altogether.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Housing First initiative has clear potential to prevent homelessness. What is the Department doing to monitor the effectiveness of pilots in Manchester and other cities, and what are its plans for taking the evidence forward?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is right. The Housing First projects in Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool are backed by the £1.2 billion that we have committed to tackle all forms of homelessness and rough sleeping across the country through to 2020. Housing First and the private rented sector access fund are also providing local authorities with flexible funding to tackle the homelessness pressures they are facing.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The guidance also says that an authority moving a homeless family out to another area should inform the receiving authority within 14 days. I have written to the Minister twice about this issue, and she has replied that Peterborough City Council is systematically dumping homeless families in Travelodges across South Yorkshire without telling the receiving authority. What will she do to ensure that the statutory guidance passed by this House is actually enforced and that authorities do not continue to flout it?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Gentleman is an assiduous Member and does such a good job of chairing the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—[Interruption.] Do you mind? We are trying to get there; let us have a bit of civility, shall we?

I have written again to the hon. Gentleman, and the important thing is that we have now had frank words with the local authority in Peterborough to say that it should have informed the receiving authorities—it has now done that. The team we have put together to help with homelessness is having a special word with Peterborough and other councils that were thinking of placing homeless people out of borough.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Homelessness has risen in each and every one of the past seven years. In the last year alone, 440 homeless people have died. The Budget pledged nearly £10 billion to a poorly targeted help-to-buy scheme, but it failed to mention homelessness once. Now the Secretary of State has scrimped together a measly £15,000 each for councils to tackle winter pressures. Will that guarantee that we will not see any rough sleepers on the streets this winter?

Mrs Wheeler: Sadly I do not have a crystal ball, but what I do have is a team of fantastic advisers who are making sure that councils have put in really good bids to help rough sleepers. Secondly, there is money: £40 million, £30 million, £75 million and, now, another £5 million. This Government take homelessness and rough sleeping extremely seriously, and we are the only Government who have put it in our manifesto that we want to halve homelessness and rough sleeping. We will be looking after the most vulnerable people in 2020, and we will finish this altogether in 2027. The answer is that the Government and the money that taxpayers are providing are doing their best.

Local Government: Departmental Support

3. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department’s support for local government. [907434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Councils will receive a real-terms increase in financial resources both this year and next. Furthermore, the Department funds the Local Government Association to provide support for local authorities to build leadership capacity, conduct peer reviews and facilitate efficiency initiatives.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the Minister for that. What help is being provided specifically for Somerset County Council to cope with the escalating demands of adult social care and children’s services? Will he bear in mind that Somerset County Council desperately needs £80 million from the housing infrastructure fund in order to cope with providing much-needed future infrastructure?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is tireless in pressing Somerset’s case. We listened carefully to her and others, and the Budget confirmed an additional £650 million for social care next year, and indeed an additional £500 million for the housing infrastructure fund. I am sure that the Minister for Housing will have heard her submission, but given what I have said, and the LGA’s specific support for Somerset with its children’s services, I hope she feels that we are responding to Somerset’s concerns and hers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether the Minister has ever heard the song “Streets of London” by Ralph McTell, but it is worth listening to just to be reminded of what the streets of every town in this country are like: how run down they are; how many rough sleepers there are; how much deterioration there is; how much graffiti there is; and how many broken pavements there are. That is what my constituents see in my town, and it is happening up and down this country because this Government have starved our country’s local government service.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman may want to talk this country down, but Conservative Members have enormous faith in towns and communities up and down this country, which was why in the Budget we backed Britain’s high streets with a £675 million fund. We did that because we believe in local communities taking control of their high streets and developing vibrant communities that we will enjoy for years to come.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that local authorities in rural areas can deliver public services effectively?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend has met me and others to discuss the cost of delivering services in rural areas, particularly in Leicestershire. His local county council has been a vocal proponent of a new fair funding
formula, and I am pleased to tell him that we are engaged with his council and others to take into account those concerns, and we will shortly be issuing the latest round of consultation on those proposals.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): When one of the councils serving my constituency still faces £43 million of cuts over the next four years—more than the combined total it currently spends on recycling, parks, libraries, children’s centres, roads and pavements, and community safety—does the Secretary of State agree with the Prime Minister that austerity is over, or does he share the incredulity of so many of my constituents who wonder how she could possibly be so out of touch?

**Rishi Sunak:** This Government believe in backing local authorities to build strong communities. The hon. Lady mentioned parks and roads. Perhaps she heard in the Budget about £240 million for our councils to fix potholes this winter. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently announced another round of our hugely successful pocket parks programme, and I encourage her local authority to bid as well.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): In Northamptonshire, the borough councils, the district councils and the county council are all working together to set up two new unitary authorities. Is the excellent Minister able to say when he is going to consult on that? Secondly, is he able to say when he will make a decision on whether next year’s borough and district council elections need to go ahead?

**Rishi Sunak:** May I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all the local councillors in Northamptonshire, who are working very constructively together through a difficult situation to ensure that their residents benefit at the end of the process? I can tell him that reasonably shortly we will be issuing details about the next step of that process. As he rightly points out, as part of that the Government may have the ability to delay the elections next year, should that be requested by the authorities and make sense in the context of the new unitisation proposals.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): This Government’s record on local government is clear: since 2010, the Department’s budget has fallen by at least £13 billion; and, by 2020, the revenue support grant will be cut by 80%—£8 billion—putting more pressure on to council tax, which is an unequal levy. Northamptonshire has, in effect, gone bust, with the media reporting that Surrey, East Sussex and Lancashire are next in line. Services are under pressure—cut, slashed or stopped altogether—and councils are at breaking point. The Public Accounts Committee asked Ministers to publish a definition of “financial sustainability” for councils, methodology for assessing authorities at financial risk, and projections for spending and demand in service areas, so why have they refused? This is common sense; what has the Minister got to hide?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Gentleman has a job to do, and I appreciate that—it is his job to put pressure on us—but I would have thought that this week, after all the question sessions we have had, he would have joined me in welcoming last week’s Budget, which includes £1 billion extra for local government across two years.

### New Homes

5. **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (James Brokenshire): The publication of the national planning policy framework provides greater clarity and certainty for the development of homes. We are examining the recommendations of my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on the build-out review and will respond in full in February.

**Sir Nicholas Soames:** The Government would see greater progress in their quest to shorten the time it takes to build new homes if people were able to have greater confidence in the design and layout of large housing developments. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the steps he is taking to get that done, but does he agree that what really worries people is not only the housing but the inability to provide adequate social infrastructure to cope with massive amounts of new housing where there simply is not currently the infrastructure to support it?

**James Brokenshire:** I recognise the points that my right hon. Friend highlights and welcome his support for the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission, which will look at that sense of place and the identity between our built environment and how we live our lives. He also rightfully highlights the issues relating to infrastructure. I hope that he will welcome the extra £500 million that the Chancellor committed in last week’s Budget to the housing infrastructure fund to deal with the issues that he rightly points out.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Some 140,000 children are waiting in temporary accommodation for new homes. In the meantime, how long does the Secretary of State think it is acceptable for a child to have to travel to school—two hours? Three hours? Some children are getting home at 9 pm because their school is so far away from where they are placed.

**James Brokenshire:** The point that the hon. Lady makes is about the need to build more homes, which is precisely what we are doing as a Government. We are ensuring that housing associations are building more with the £9 billion fund, and by lifting the borrowing caps we are ensuring that councils can build more, along with what the private sector is doing. That way, people can have strong communities and the services that they need close at hand.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Does the Secretary of State recognise that one of the best ways to bring forward more new homes quickly is to support my Housing Reform Bill, which has support from Members from all parties, including some of the House’s most distinguished Members? The Bill’s requirement on the Secretary of State to provide serviced plots for sale or for rent to rich people and poor people, social tenants and others, would do a lot to solve our housing crisis.
Residential Property Management

6. Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What progress has he made on improving standards in the management of residential property in the (a) private rented and (b) social housing sectors. [R]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): All tenants deserve a safe and decent place to live. In respect of the private rented sector, Lord Best is chairing a new working group on property agent regulation, and we have extended mandatory licensing. The social housing Green Paper contains proposals to drive up the performance of social landlords in delivering a good service.

Mr Prisk: I welcome the reforms, especially the requirement for all residential managers to be trained and qualified. That is the way to raise standards. However, there are concerns about how the requirement may be introduced. Will the Minister agree to a meeting to discuss how existing qualifications will be accredited by the proposed mandatory qualifications, so that we do not end up worsening the current shortage of competent managers?

Kit Malthouse: With his usual accuracy, my hon. Friend identifies an issue critical to getting this matter right. As he knows, the working group will be looking at the entire property agent sector to ensure that any new regulatory framework is joined up across letting, property management and estate agents. One of the key issues in making that new regulatory framework land is the transition from the old to new, and I will be more than happy—indeed it would be foolish of me not to agree—to meet a former Housing Minister of such standing.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): According to the Government’s own figures, there are more than 10,000 rogue landlords operating in England. Will the Minister therefore explain to tenants who are suffering from damp and often unsafe conditions why none of these landlords appears on the Government’s new rogue landlord database?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Lady knows, the database was introduced earlier this year and it will take time to populate in order for landlords to appear on it. There will obviously have to be investigations, prosecutions, and penalties levied so that they can properly be entered on to the database. She will know that the introduction of banning orders and a rogue landlord database will have an enormous impact in future. We just have to make sure that we get the right names on it.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Having man’s best friend by one’s side can make a massive difference to somebody who is suffering from loneliness, social isolation or mental health issues. I am aware of at least one local authority that has taken the retrograde step of banning its tenants from keeping a pet. Will my hon. Friend please look at the guidance given to local councils, because, to many people, having a pet is their lifetime?

Kit Malthouse: As part of a family who regard their pet cat as an intrinsic and important member of our household—[Interruption.] Well, hon. Members may well be amused by that, but it is true what my hon. Friend says: a number of people, particularly those who live alone or those who have children, rely on their pets for comfort and calm and for companionship. I would hope that all local authorities operated a humane and compassionate letting policy where this is concerned, and I would be more than happy to look at the rules around that.

Mr Speaker: I empathise very strongly with the Minister, and there should be no levity over this important matter. Our own household cat is very fundamental to our way of life and is suitably named Order.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have no pets to declare to the House.

On behalf of my party, I offer our condolences on the passing of Sir Jeremy Heywood and our thanks for his service in public life.

It was encouraging to hear that the UK Government are to follow the example set in 2015 by the Scottish Government and introduce mandatory five-year electrical safety checks on rental homes. Will the Minister confirm a start date for those checks?

Kit Malthouse: I am afraid that I will have to write to the hon. Lady with that answer as I do not have it to hand at the moment, but she is quite right that we have been reviewing standards generally in the private rented sector and considering what more we can do to make sure that private rented homes are as safe as they can possibly be.

Alison Thewliss: That is a disappointing response, particularly considering how important safety is to people renting accommodation. Citizens Advice found that renters in England who complain about issues with their home are statistically more likely to get evicted. The Scottish Government abolished no-fault evictions recently. Will the Minister consider doing likewise so that tenants in England do not fear reporting faults with their homes?

Kit Malthouse: We certainly want to make sure that the phenomenon of revenge evictions is stamped out and that there is an equality of power between tenants and landlords in both the social and the private rented sectors.

Local Authority Funding: Allocation

7. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the equitable allocation of funding to local authorities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): We are undertaking a fair funding review of local authorities’ relative needs and resources to address concerns about
the fairness of the current system. This will determine the new funding allocations for local authorities through a more up-to-date and fairer funding formula.

**Robert Courts**: Rural areas are historically underfunded and in West Oxfordshire we need more funding for road repairs, upgrades to the A40 and adult social care. How is fairer funding progressing and will this be addressed in the spending review?

**Rishi Sunak**: I am pleased to say that we are making very good progress and are considering many of the topics raised by hon. Members, including rapidly changing demographics affecting social care and the cost of delivering services in rural areas. I look forward to collaborating closely with the sector and with my hon. Friend’s county as we look to introduce a simple, accurate and transparent new funding formula.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If funding is so equitable, why is North Lincolnshire Council giving people on the lowest incomes such a low level of support with their council tax, at only 50%? Why is the council sending nearly all its discretionary housing payments back to the Government?

**Rishi Sunak**: Decisions about local council tax support are rightly for individual local authorities to make themselves; it would not be appropriate for me to dictate to them. The fairer funding formula is designed to determine the equitable nature of funding distributed to all local authorities. The hon. Gentleman will know that the current system dates back to 2013-14, and indeed many elements date back decades before that. We are determined to fix it and bring it up to date.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Minister for supporting the measures in the Budget exempting public toilets from business rates and providing a commitment to take action regarding second home owners who are avoiding business rates. I very much welcome his words on a fair funding formula, but when the fair funding formula was previously introduced, it was dampened away. Will he make a commitment that rural councils really will see the benefit of a new fairer formula this time?

**Rishi Sunak**: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for successfully placing in the Budget measures on public toilet relief and second homes. With regard to my hon. Friend’s second point, I am determined to ensure that the new formula is transparent and that all local authorities—not just those in rural areas—have a clearer idea about their allocation under the new formula, and transition to those new allocations in a relatively short timeframe.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): A recent report by the New Policy Institute shows that the majority of local government cuts have fallen on the 10 most deprived councils, despite the fact that they have higher numbers of looked-after children and adults needing social care and other council services. Will the Minister now commit to funding councils properly and according to levels of need, rather than political colour, as the Government appear to be doing at the moment?

**Rishi Sunak**: It is simply not the case that that is how funding is determined. Although out of date, the current funding formulas do contain deprivation measures and funding is distributed on the basis of need. That is also how the new funding for adult social care, announced just last week, will be distributed—according to the relative needs formula.

### Local Authority Funding

8. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government funding for local authorities in England.

10. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government funding for local authorities in England.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Rishi Sunak): The Government have listened and responded to the pressures faced by local authorities. The autumn Budget helped to support financial sustainability of local authorities and provided more than £1 billion of additional funding across this year and next year for local authorities to deliver local services, support vulnerable residents and build vibrant communities.

**Lilian Greenwood**: I welcome the short-term support for adult social care promised in last week’s Budget, but it is a sticking plaster at best. In Nottingham, it costs an average of £450 a week to care for someone at home, compared to £2,500 in hospital. Our NHS trusts are already raising concerns about winter pressures. Inadequate social care provision adds to those pressures and will inevitably cost the Government more in the long term. I know that the Minister understands the importance and efficacy of early intervention and prevention, so can he provide any assurances that he understands the need to fund adult social care sustainably and tell us what support will be provided from 2020 onwards?

**Rishi Sunak**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to mention the importance of prevention, and of the interaction between the NHS and social care. Later this year, we will see the publication of the Government’s Green Paper with a long-term sustainable settlement for social care. That will answer her question as to the settlement for social care beyond next year in the spending review.

**Stephen Timms**: My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) just mentioned Cambridge University research published last month showing that local authority spending cuts have been concentrated on the poorest areas, making disparities with better-off areas much worse. Phasing out central Government grants, as Ministers are proposing, will make that even worse. Are Ministers happy just to let the disparities between different areas rocket?

**Rishi Sunak**: It may be worth pointing out to the right hon. Gentleman that core spending power per household in the most deprived local authority areas in
the country is 23% higher than that in the least deprived. This Government support all communities with the resources that they need.

New Homes for Social Rent

9. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of new homes provided for social rent since 2010.

[907442]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Since 2010, we have delivered over 378,000 new affordable homes, including 129,000 for social rent. We are investing over £9 billion in the affordable homes programme to deliver more than 250,000 new affordable homes, including at least 12,500 for social rent.

Ian Austin: There are thousands of households languishing on Dudley’s waiting lists. I meet families every single week who are desperate for a home of their own. Funding for new affordable homes has fallen from over £4 billion in 2009-10 to less than £500 million last year, and the amount of social housing built for rent is actually falling to its lowest level since the war. In that context, what hope do my constituents have of the decent, secure and affordable home that they dream of?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are throwing literally everything we have got at the housing market at the moment in the hope that we can build the homes that everybody in the country needs. In particular, in the social sector, we have increased the size of the affordable homes programme. We have reintroduced the idea of social rent; removed the housing revenue account borrowing cap for local authorities; and are setting long-term rent deals for councils and housing associations, enabling them to plan. We have also committed funding beyond 2022 for housing deals and partnerships with housing associations, which we think will deliver significant numbers of houses. It must be remembered that the Labour Government the hon. Gentleman supported induced local authorities to get out of house building. I was a councillor at the time. We were offered large amounts of money to get rid of our housing stock. That has to end. We want councils to start building to address exactly the needs he raises.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we are building a new garden community of 10,000 homes, more than one in four of which will be affordable, but the council wants to do more. What measures will there be to allow councils that do not have a housing revenue account also to take advantage of the new schemes that will enable them to borrow and build their own properties?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is right. Quite a number of local authorities, having been induced, as I say, to get out of the house building industry and home-owning function, do not have housing revenue accounts. At the moment, if they construct, build or own more than about 200 council homes they have to open a housing revenue account. We hope that the new freedom we have introduced will enable councils to create innovative partnerships with other social housing providers to build the next generation of council houses.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The net number of social homes for rent built in the last financial year was 7,000, so we are losing a large number of these homes. We all agree that we need a lot more social homes for rent. In order to build more, will the Minister consider local authorities being given first right of refusal when public land comes up for sale, with a sale price based on current use rather than a speculative development price?

Kit Malthouse: I am engaged in an intensive amount of activity on the subject of public land with my ministerial colleagues and those elsewhere. Hon. Members will have seen that we have recently changed the rules so that local authorities can dispose of their own public land at less than market value if they deem there is a social need to do so. Whether or not we can give them first refusal on acquiring that land will depend on their ability to deliver the homes that people need. I am very focused on numbers of homes rather than principles of disposal.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Our policies on affordable homes are almost entirely focused on affordable homes to rent. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should also deliver more affordable homes to purchase?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is one of the most innovative thinkers in housing policy generally, certainly on the Conservative Benches—not that there is much innovation on the Labour Benches—but there we are. He points to an area where there is strong demand. Very large numbers of people who would otherwise be tenants have a strong desire to own, and we would love to see them owning on a discounted basis. Hon. Members will have seen in the Budget the announcement of funding for neighbourhood plans to enable an allocation of discounted homes for sale, particularly in rural areas, and I would be keen to explore the idea further with my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I have no reason to think that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is anything other than an innovative thinker on this and other matters, but it might be of interest to people to know that he is also a distinguished estate agent.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): You rather took the wind from my sails there, Mr Speaker.

The Minister refers to housing associations, and it will not have escaped his notice that the chief executives of housing associations earn on average comfortably more than the Prime Minister, with the upper decile trousering salaries in the eye-watering range of £250,000 to £400,000. Is the Minister entirely comfortable with that?

Kit Malthouse: One issue that we are considering as part of our work on the social housing Green Paper is whether the tenant voice is heard strongly enough at the highest levels of housing associations. We must remember that some of these organisations are extremely large. The largest ones are huge and complex, looking after many hundreds of thousands of people, and the individuals who run them shoulder enormous responsibility and, indeed, risk. It is for those boards, suitably informed by the tenant body, to make decisions about remuneration.
11. Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [907444]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): My recent visit to India provided an important opportunity to promote the midlands engine in that significant market. This month, we announced funding to support the creation of a new locally led development body for Toton, as well as £70 million for the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre, and we will refresh the midlands engine strategy.

Lee Rowley: A great example of the potential economic development in the midlands is the shortlisting of Barrow Hill in my constituency as the next potential site for the Spanish train manufacturer Talgo. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that shortlisting and—fingers crossed—hoping that we get it?

James Brokenshire: I note my hon. Friend’s fingers are crossed. I am delighted to hear that Talgo is considering investing in the UK. I hope he will understand that as there are still a number of locations under consideration, it would be wrong for me to comment further—although, having visited the potential site in his constituency this summer, I can say that it is clearly an excellent site for investment.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The midlands engine is working with Stoke-on-Trent City Council as part of the transforming cities fund and making bids for significant investment. It was heartening to hear the Chancellor refer to that in his speech last Monday. Could the Secretary of State put us out of our misery and announce from the Dispatch Box today that Stoke will receive that funding, which would save a further round of hoop-jumping?

Mrs Wheeler: Good try!

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend says, that is a good try. I recognise the way in which the hon. Gentleman has championed Stoke, this initiative and the funding. All I can say is that we will look at that carefully, but I hope he gets a sense of the attention and focus we are giving to the midlands engine.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The midlands engine covers approximately two thirds of Lincolnshire—the county council area—but my constituency is served by the two unitary authorities in the north. Co-ordination of economic policies falls to both the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership and the Humber local enterprise partnership. Both the local authorities and LEPs would like to maintain the status quo. Could the Secretary of State bear that in mind in the upcoming review?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will note the conclusions of the review, particularly in relation to governance and overlapping geographies. It is important that we have reform and work with the LEPs to take this forward, and I look forward to having discussions with the LEP chairs in the coming days.

12. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [907445]

17. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [907452]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank my hon. Friend for her reply, and it is great to see her back in her place. As she will know, Torbay is very keen to take forward a Housing First pilot for our bay, to end the scourge of rough sleeping. Can she update us on what plans the Government have for that approach to be adopted?

Mrs Wheeler: We are delighted to be piloting Housing First at scale across England for the first time. The impact of that approach will be measured by a rigorous evaluation, which will ensure that we have the robust evidence base needed to demonstrate its effectiveness and inform future spending decisions.

Will Quince: Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the more than 20 homelessness and health charities, including St Mungo’s, which today published a joint open letter to Sir Simon Stevens of NHS England, that to tackle homelessness, we need to ensure that the NHS works with others and local authorities to provide better support for those tackling mental health, alcohol and drug addiction and sleeping rough on our streets?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on this matter. We appreciate that this is a very high priority for all local constituency MPs on both sides of the Chamber. I certainly agree that wraparound support is crucial to help people who have been sleeping rough to access and sustain accommodation. In our recent rough sleeping strategy, we announced a range of measures, including asking NHS England to spend up to £30 million over five years on health services for rough sleepers.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Street homelessness is a growing problem in my city of Leeds, reflecting inadequate social housing and mental health provision, and cuts to benefits. Big Change Leeds, launched last month, is bringing together everyone trying to help those who are street homeless in our city by giving their time or money. Will the Government welcome this initiative, but more importantly, will they commit their support by giving Leeds City Council the money it needs to address this growing problem in our city?

Mrs Wheeler: Again, I reiterate how very important this question is to everybody on both sides of the Chamber. I had the great pleasure of talking last week to the chief executive of the council in Leeds about the strategy and about the money and the help we are...
giving to the city. It was a really useful conversation to find a chief executive who is so committed to the project.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister say how much money to deal with homelessness she has given to the local authority in Coventry and the charities in Coventry, which tell me that their allocations have been cut? That is no way to deal with homelessness.

Mrs Wheeler: I am very sorry that the charities are telling the local Member that, because overall we are putting in place a £1.2 billion fund for homelessness, I would certainly be very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman. His area is part of the greater west midlands project, and the greater west midlands Mayor, Andy Street, has many millions of pounds to help with homelessness—going to Coventry as well as the other parts of the greater west midlands.

Mr Speaker: I want to get through two more questions very quickly.

Leasehold Changes

13. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent steps has he taken to ensure that changes to existing leasehold are more (a) accessible and (b) affordable.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is right that developers who sold leaseholds with onerous terms should support their customers to amend them. Some developers have introduced assistance schemes, which is welcome, but these must go further and faster. We are meeting developers shortly to discuss progress, and we will take further action as necessary.

Chi Onwurah: The St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust in my constituency is a charity that is refusing to allow its leaseholders to extend their leases, in a wholly uncharitable way. The Secretary of State talks about roundtables and reviews, but when will my constituents get some sort of justice and the ability to extend their leases?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady has a particular problem with a particular trust. The good news is that, following last year’s discussions, the trust has now made an offer to some of her constituents to enable them to purchase their freeholds. I am aware that her constituents have found the freehold purchase price of the leasehold properties to be prohibitive. We are also aware that different formulas are in use to establish the cost of enfranchisement. The Government are looking to standardise enfranchisement processes and have asked the Law Commission to review current arrangements, including the valuation methodology. This will support existing leaseholders by making buying the freehold or extending the leasehold easier, faster and cheaper.

First-time Buyers: Help to Buy and Stamp Duty

14. Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect on first-time buyers of (a) Help to Buy and (b) the reduction in stamp duty.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): In the interests of providing a good service, Mr Speaker, I hope you will indulge me if I refer to my answer to the hon. Lady from north of the border, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I just want to say that there is no fixed date at the moment for bringing in the affirmative statutory instrument that will make it mandatory to have five-year electrical checks in the private rented centre, but we are searching for a slot as soon as possible in a crowded and exciting legislative timetable.

In answer to Question 14, the Government are working together to help more people on to the housing ladder. Help to Buy equity loans have helped over 169,000 households to March 2018, 81% were to first-time buyers and 121,500 people have benefited from first-time buyers relief from stamp duty since June 2018.

Sir Robert Syms: I am grateful for the cuts in stamp duty for those at the lower end and the help for home ownership, but the higher rates of stamp duty may be having an adverse effect on the housing market. It could cost the Treasury £300 million, so a cut leading to more income, leaving more resources for those at the lower end could be in prospect. Has the Housing Minister raised that with the Treasury?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is a political toxophilite of the highest order and has fired his arrows into a subject that is the cause of constant discussion between us and the Treasury. He knows that we all acknowledge the effect that stamp duty can have on the market; that is why he may have seen changes in the Budget to stamp duty on shared ownership, which we hope will benefit first-time buyers. However, I will keep him apprised of conversations as we have them.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have the tribute framed. It would be very disappointing if he did not.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the number of people who have used Help to Buy who are now in negative equity because of leasehold reform? They cannot sell the properties and the price has fallen, so the taxpayer and the individual are hit.

Kit Malthouse: At this stage, there is no indication from the early returns on Help to Buy that the situation that the right hon. Gentleman raises is occurring. Indeed, early numbers show a higher level of successful redemption than we expected and we hope that that will continue.

Topical Questions

T1. [907456] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): This week, I am meeting developers at a leasehold roundtable to press them to tackle onerous ground rents, and I will attend the Locality Convention in Bristol to acknowledge the hard work of our community organisations and set out our ambition for increased localism.
Wednesday’s celebration of Diwali will be a special moment to reflect and celebrate the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil. As we mourn the tragic events in Pittsburgh, especially in the context of this week’s 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, we are clear that racism and xenophobia in whatever form have no place in our society and will be confronted in the strongest terms.

Peter Aldous: It was great that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Local Government were able to attend last Wednesday’s launch of the county all-party parliamentary group’s report on social mobility in county areas. Will my right hon. Friend work with the APPG to implement the report’s 11 recommendations, which will do so much to ensure that young people across the country have the opportunity to realise their full potential?

James Brokenshire: That sense of social justice to which my hon. Friend alludes and which was in the report profoundly reflects the Government’s aspirations and intent to see a country that works for everyone. I look forward to continuing to work with him and the APPG in considering the fair funding review and other steps to ensure that we realise that aspiration.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Trading standards are the foot soldiers in keeping the public from falling victim to unsafe goods, yet cuts to local authorities mean that trading standards budgets have fallen by more than 50% between 2009 and 2019, with a 56% reduction in the number of offices. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute is warning that, as we approach Brexit, the role of those dedicated professionals will be even more crucial. How can they keep the public safe from dodgy and dangerous goods without sustainable funding?

James Brokenshire: We are providing a real terms increase in funding for local government this year and next year, recognising some of the pressures that exist. We continue to support local government and, in the context of Brexit, we are working with it to ensure effective preparations for protecting our communities.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Like the Minister, I welcome the Budget’s announcements of £630 million extra for social care and £84 million for children’s social care programmes over five years. Will he confirm when local authorities, including Torbay Council, will be told what their share of this new money will be?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I can tell my hon. Friend that £240 million of the £650 million is being committed to social care, which is why this year an extra £240 million has been committed and £650 million is being committed through the Budget to deal with those pressures. We are looking to long-term sustainability and valuing our local government sector, which is what we do.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last week, Southern Landlords Association filed for judicial review on selective licensing in Brighton. The Government’s response was to revoke the licence to regulate the private sector. This is not the first judicial review to derail selective licensing. Irrespective of the particular issue I am working on with the Minister, is it now not time to review the way selective licensing works and to stop judicial reviews, particularly vexatious ones like those from Southern Landlords Association, derailing the ability of councils to regulate the private sector and rogue landlords?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman might like to secure an Adjournment debate on the subject.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): What a very good idea, Mr Speaker. I will not talk about the judicial review in detailed terms—obviously, it is ongoing—but I have been proud to sign off selective licensing in other parts of the country where the council has done a good job. I ask the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in Brighton to urge the local council to review its paperwork. If it comes back with detailed arrangements that I can sign off, I certainly will.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): The money announced in last week’s Budget to help to revitalise our high streets was warmly welcomed in my constituency of Southport. Will the Minister confirm when that money will be available?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Mr Speaker, if you ever take the opportunity to visit Southport, like Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, you will find out that its famous high street, Lord Street, inspired the wide boulevards of Paris. The £675 million future high street fund, which is the historic high street will hope to access, will be subject to a prospectus published by my Department by the end of the year.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): When I was a local authority executive member back in 2012, we were often warned about the “graph of doom”, which showed that by about 2018 local authorities would be running out of money for everything but statutory services. At the time, the Government accused the Local Government Association and the National Audit Office of scaremongering, but given what has happened in Northamptonshire and elsewhere, those warnings were accurate, were they not?

James Brokenshire: We recognise the pressures on social care, which is why this year an extra £240 million has been committed and £650 million is being committed through the Budget to deal with those pressures. We are looking to long-term sustainability and valuing our local government sector, which is what we do.
T7. [907463] Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I am delighted to say that Solihull has one of the highest proportions of home ownership in the country. However, there is still real pent-up demand, particularly among the young. Will the Minister tell me what progress the Department has made on the midlands voluntary right-to-buy pilot?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents, including those who are tenants. He is right. We have had an enthusiastic response to the midlands right-to-buy pilot, with over 9,000 people applying for a code in the ballot. Over 6,000 of them have been given a code, and we hope that a significant number will come forward to seek the ownership they desire, funded by the £200 million being put towards the pilot.

T5. [907460] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): As Brexit approaches, what is the Secretary of State’s Department doing to ensure that, when buying food, vehicles, furniture or any other goods and services, local councils follow Government guidelines to take local value into account and back British business and British workers by buying British first?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s positive outlook as we leave the European Union. We will deliver a positive Brexit, looking outwards into the world and at how we have trade deals in the future. We continue to engage with local councils to ensure that we deliver a smooth and effective Brexit.

T8. [907464] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Has my hon. Friend reviewed the better streets proposal from YIMBY and the Adam Smith Institute, which would allow residents of a single street to vote on giving themselves permitted development rights to build upwards to a maximum of six storeys and thereby address the housing crisis?

Kit Malthouse: I have done better than that—I have met them. I did so just two weeks ago to discuss their fascinating ideas, not least on how we can make the principle of neighbourhood planning work in urban areas, an issue that I know is of great importance to my hon. Friend.

T9. [907465] Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the establishment of the new all-party group on the national holocaust memorial, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and me, is very much to be welcomed? Is it not fantastic that so many Members from both sides of the House came together, at a time when antisemitism is on the increase, to establish this group and that we want to commemorate here in Parliament history’s greatest crime and support the establishment of this memorial, right here in Westminster, at the centre of not just our political life but our national life?

James Brokenshire: I absolutely recognise and commend what the hon. Gentleman said on how collectively we challenge antisemitism and stand up for the values of this country. I pay tribute to him for the personal contribution that he has made on this issue, and equally, I reflect on the statue of Frank Foley, which the hon. Gentleman was instrumental in bringing into effect. It recognises Frank Foley’s contribution in saving the lives of thousands of Jews fleeing from persecution in Germany, and we must never forget the contribution that he and others have made.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Many of my constituents are suffering from severe stress following the purchase of their homes on unfair leasehold terms. Does the Minister agree that tackling leasehold abuse is a matter of urgency, and will she comment on a timetable for action?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The Government are very clear that unjust leasehold practices must come to an end. We have committed to banning new leasehold houses and restricting ground rents on future leases to a peppercorn. We launched our consultation on the details of these proposals on 15 October. I agree that this is an urgent matter, having read many of the stories of leaseholders facing high or doubling ground rents or struggling to sell their homes, especially in my hon. Friend’s part of the north-west. We will bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the most effective ways to deal with rising housing costs and rising eviction rates is for councils to follow the lead of my council—Sutton Council—and build council homes, over 90 of which are about to come on-stream very soon?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and I commend his council for doing that. My council is going to build 175 next year.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Department work with the Department of Health and Social Care to use the local reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire as an opportunity to receive local proposals to develop a pilot for a new integrated social care and health system in the county?

James Brokenshire: We are already taking such steps. On 18 October, we convened a meeting between leaders and chief executives of the Northamptonshire councils and representatives of the local health services to start discussions on how, in future, adult social care may be best provided and integrated with health.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The ill-fated regional fire control centre in Cambridgeshire continues to stand empty, costing £2 million a year. We keep being told that it has been let or that it is about to be sold. When is the Minister going to get a grip?

James Brokenshire: Fire control now resides within the responsibilities of the Home Office, but I will certainly look into the hon. Gentleman’s points in relation to ensuring good value for money.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on the establishment of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission and the inspired choice of Sir Roger Scruton as the chairman, but, first, does my right hon. Friend not
agree that this will only have any teeth if we can get the volume house builders to buy into it? Secondly, I think that the commission should be extended to look at the quality and the variable advice often given by local planning officers and at a full accreditation scheme for those planning officers on an annual basis to refresh them.

James Brokenshire: I certainly want the new commission to drive quality in the built environment, which is at the heart of what my right hon. Friend said. If we do that, we can speed up this process and get greater support and consent from the public in building the homes that our country needs. I therefore think that the house builders should very much embrace this.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that local councils will see real-terms increases in their budgets. If so, why is Derbyshire County Council planning for £70 million of cuts, on top of the £260 million of cuts already made, and cutting the terms and conditions of its lowest-paid workers in school catering as well as services for the most vulnerable?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the challenges that local government has faced over the past few years and how councils have played their part in dealing with the public finance challenges brought about by the Labour party; let us not forget that when discussing the investment we are making to create that sustainable position for local government.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As the Minister will know, we are taking thousands of new homes in Corby and east Northamptonshire, and it is imperative that the infrastructure keep pace. Last week, the Chancellor very welcome announced a new generation of enterprise zones. May I make an early pitch for Corby, because I would argue that we qualify given the housing growth we are taking?

James Brokenshire: I have just been told that it is my hon. Friend’s birthday today. I wish him a happy birthday and note his pitch for perhaps a birthday present. We will note it down.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): A constituent of mine has been a faithful council tenant for 30 years. Over this time, she has invested much in her home. Her ex-partner served notice when he moved out, and now City of York Council is moving to evict her next week. This is having a serious impact on her mental health—among other things, it has led to her feeling suicidal—and the council still plans to move her. Will the Minister urgently meet me to discuss this case and the mental health assessments of tenants that should take place?

Mrs Wheeler: What a very sad case. Of course, I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Following the Office for National Statistics household projection figures being revised downwards by nearly a quarter, will my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that regional housing targets reflect the easing of pressure to build on the green belt, with particular reference to the Greater Manchester spatial framework?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend may know that we have already issued a technical consultation on the latest household projection numbers and the impact on projected housing need in local authority areas. We really do not want local authorities to take their foot of the accelerator, however, not least because we believe that there is pent-up demand for housing in this country. We are working with authorities across the country to get the formula right in the longer term, while we seek a short-term fix to keep numbers up, but I would be more than happy to meet him and his colleagues to discuss the Manchester spatial framework further.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Tyne and Wear fire service is facing £3 million of cuts, which could mean the closure of my local fire station. Will the Secretary of State look at the special problems with funding fire services that are facing local government in the north-east?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly raise the hon. Gentleman’s point with colleagues who lead on fire within the Home Office.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The Labour cabinet in Nuneaton and Bedworth is imposing a £40 garden tax on green waste collection, despite pledging not to do so in May’s local election. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a fundamental change to how people’s waste is collected should not be made without full and proper consultation with the public and buy-in from local people?

Rishi Sunak: My predecessor in this job well knows that such decisions are rightly for local areas to make themselves, but I would say that local authorities should look to tighten their own belts and curb any wasteful spending before increasing the bills of hard-working taxpayers.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Further to the Secretary of State’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) about Derbyshire County Council’s cuts, the cuts in question are worth more than £200 million, and they were made not by the Labour Government, as he stated, but by the Tory Government in alliance with the Liberal Democrats. To refresh his memory further, I should remind him that we also trebled the amount of money going into the hospital. Now a Tory county council at Matlock has decided to close 20 libraries in the county. That’s politics.

James Brokenshire: I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman about the steps the Government have had to take to put the public finance back on an even keel as a consequence of the Labour party’s actions, and he should well know our commitment to investing in the health service in a way the Labour party would not have done.
Leaving the EU: Rights of EU Citizens

3.44 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the arrangements for EU citizens in the event of no deal being agreed in the Article 50 negotiations.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): While we are confident about agreeing a good deal for both sides, as a responsible Government we will continue to prepare for all scenarios, including the unlikely outcome that we leave the EU without any deal in March 2019. We have reached an agreement with the EU on citizens’ rights that will protect EU citizens and their family members who are resident in the UK until the end of the planned implementation period on 31 December 2020.

We are introducing the EU settlement scheme under UK immigration law for resident EU citizens and their family members covered by the draft withdrawal agreement. That will enable those who are resident in the UK before the end of the planned implementation period to confirm their status under the settlement scheme. Anyone who already has five years’ continuous residence in the UK when they apply under the scheme will be eligible to apply for settled status. Those who have not yet reached the point of five years’ continuous residence will be eligible to be granted pre-settled status, and will be able to apply for settled status once they have reached that point.

The Prime Minister has already confirmed that, in the unlikely event of no deal, all EU citizens who are resident here by 29 March 2019 will be welcome to stay. They are part of our community and part of our country, and we welcome the contribution that they make. Last week the Prime Minister extended that commitment to citizens of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, and we are close to reaching an agreement with Switzerland. We will set out further details shortly, so that those affected can have the clarity and certainty that they need.

Yvette Cooper: Unfortunately, the Minister did not give us the clarity that we need. Nor did she clear up the confusion from last week, which I had hoped she would do, especially at a time when there is considerable concern for EU citizens, as well as practical concerns for employers about what arrangements will apply in April, May and June next year if no deal takes place.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to respect the rights of those currently living here, who will be able to stay and work as now, but I am still none the wiser about what checks will apply to those EU citizens in the event of no deal. The Minister and the Home Office officials suggested to us that there would be additional employer checks, and also that free movement would be turned off in March. However, the Home Secretary has told the media that in fact there will be a transition period, and that there will be no additional checks for employers if there is no deal.

Will the Minister tell us whether there will be additional employer checks on EU citizens immediately after no deal—yes or no? Will she confirm that EU citizens will not have to provide anything other than a passport or an identity card in order to be able to work? Will she also tell us whether that will then apply until the completion of the roll-out of the EU settlement scheme, which is due to be completed in June 2021? If not, what on earth are EU citizens supposed to provide as proof of their right to work before June 2021 if the settlement scheme has not been completed?

The Minister and the Home Office have now said that there is no way of differentiating between EU citizens arriving here for the first time and those who have been here for many years. Will the Minister confirm that newly arriving EU citizens will also not have to provide anything other than a passport or an ID card, and that they will continue to be able to work under the same arrangements, also until June 2021?

Those are basic questions that the Home Office really should be able to answer. If the facts are not as I have put them to the Minister, she should be able to tell us what the alternative facts are, what alternative information and proof EU citizens are supposed to provide, and what alternative questions employers are supposed to ask. The clock is ticking, and there are only five months left. Surely the Home Office has a grip of those basic questions.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Lady for affording me the opportunity to clarify this point. Employers will of course continue to need to check passports or ID cards—as they do now for EU citizens, and indeed for British citizens, when making a new job offer. We will not be asking employers to differentiate even if there is no deal, and the right hon. Lady will of course be conscious that we are working hard to secure a deal. The Prime Minister has been very clear, as indeed has the Brexit Secretary, that we will honour our commitment to EU citizens and their family members, and more information will be set out in due course, with a specific statement on citizens from the Brexit Secretary, who of course wishes to make clear that people are incredibly important and should not simply be reliant on a technical notice.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): My question is twofold. First, can the Minister give us the timelines under which she expects to be setting out further details? Secondly—this is important for London constituencies like mine, which have a high number of EU workers and businesses that rely on EU workers—can she confirm that this step will be taken in a spirit of understanding that recruitment will be made in good faith by employers and should the rules then be set in a different way to what they had anticipated, that will be borne in mind in relation to fines and any other action that can be currently taken against employers employing people illegally?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend is right to point out the high numbers of EU citizens in her constituency and indeed employers’ reliance upon them. That is why it is important that we have a reasonable and sensible transition period that gives us time to make sure that any new immigration system sets out the requirements very clearly so that there can be certainty for individuals, and indeed for employers.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the very real distress that this confusion over policy, which the Home Office had to correct, has caused to over 3.5 million EU citizens
resident in this country—and not just to them, but to their families, dependents and employers? On a related matter, does the Minister remember her reply to a written question in June when she said that providing DNA evidence would be entirely voluntary? Yet the Home Secretary recently had to come before the House and correct that and apologise for the immigration and nationality department imposing mandatory DNA testing. So does the Minister accept that as we move towards leaving the EU this type of confusion over policy is simply not acceptable? It is not just the good faith of Government that she is calling into question, but it is people's lives that we are playing with. Finally, does the Minister accept that it is simply not good enough to come before this House and talk about further information being provided in due course? There are five months to go and the clock is ticking, and we want no further confusions of this nature.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady will of course know that the full Alcock report is in the House of Commons Library and it sets out very clearly the information regarding the parliamentary question to which she has referred. She also referred to the 3.5 million citizens already in this country: the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Brexit Secretary and indeed myself have been very clear that we want those people to stay, and by opening the EU settled status scheme, which we have done now in private beta testing phase 2, we are already putting in place steps that have enabled in the region of 1,000 people to confirm their status.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is very important that the Government are generous and treat properly everybody who has come here lawfully up until the day that we leave, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also extremely important that, once we have left, we take back control of our borders?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will have heard the Prime Minister's very clear statements on this. As part of Brexit we will end free movement, giving us back control of our borders, which is what I believe people voted for in 2016 and which I know my hon. Friend wants.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Citizens need clarity, and that is why this House has set it out, not only in the citizens' rights agreement but in the settled status scheme, which, as I have said, is now open in one of its private beta testing phases. Phase 1 went very well, and phase 2 is now under way. After a firebreak over Christmas, we will be opening it up in phase 3. To me, it is obvious that the best solution is to ensure that these rights are enshrined in UK immigration law, which is what we are going to do.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that around one in seven of my constituents are EU nationals. That is possibly the highest proportion in the country. In my experience, most of them are very appreciative of the guarantees given by the Government so far. Nevertheless, most of them had no reasonable expectation that they would ever have to clarify their immigration status. Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that we will treat those cases sensitively and individually? I have quite a few cases involving people who have been here for perhaps 20 years and have strong roots in this country, but who have spent some time abroad during the past five years, for example.

Caroline Nokes: UK Visas and Immigration is already on-boarding significantly increased numbers of caseworkers for the European Economic Area casework that will flow through from the settled status scheme. It is important that individuals are given as easy a journey as possible through the process and, to date, 95% of those who have completed the settled status process have found it easy to do so. My right hon. Friend makes an important point, however. We want to be in a position to support individuals through the process, and to have a “computer says yes” attitude rather than a “computer says no” attitude. People will only have to demonstrate that they have been in the UK, which will in many cases be done best by sharing HMRC records with the Home Office.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): If the UK leaves the EU in March with no deal, and if, as the Minister has told the House this afternoon, employers will not be required to make any additional checks other than asking for an EU passport, has in effect told the House that free movement will continue after we have left the European Union. Will she now address the question that the Chair of the Select Committee asked her: how long will that situation continue? To many of us, it seems that it will have to continue until such time as an application process for settled status is completed, because only at that point will an employer be able to distinguish between someone who has settled status and someone who arrived the previous day carrying an EU passport.

Caroline Nokes: As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary indicated, we are seeking a sensible transition period that will enable the Home Office to ensure that these cases can be caseworked. The Prime Minister has been very clear that free movement will end—[Interruption.] We will in due course set out the future immigration system, which will enable there to be further clarity.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government legislate, before our departure from the EU on 30 March, for a comprehensive system for immigration, migration
and citizenship that is fair to all concerned? That is what we voted for. Does the Minister also understand that a lot of us will not be voting for a withdrawal agreement to pay £39 billion that we do not owe when we need to spend that money here at home?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. As I have said, free movement will end, and over the next few weeks we will set out the parliamentary timetable for the immigration Bill.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): How will free movement end at the end of March if EU citizens, including people arriving here after March, do not have to do anything different, other than produce their EU passport as they do now?

Caroline Nokes: The immigration Bill will be coming forward—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is rather unseemly. Members must not harangue the Minister. She is addressing the House with great courtesy; let us hear her answer.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think “unseemly” is a perfect description.

As I said, we will be bringing forward the parliamentary timetable for the immigration Bill shortly, and further details will be set out in due course, which I am sure will give the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) satisfaction.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What reciprocal announcements have been made by EU states following the Prime Minister’s generous offer in respect of leaving with no deal?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes an important point. At every opportunity, Ministers raise both with the EU and our counterparts in the EU27 the important factor of UK citizens lawfully residing in other EU member states. There is of course huge concern that we have made a generous offer to EU citizens living in the United Kingdom after Brexit would be offered full voting rights in Westminster parliamentary elections? Will she confirm that that is not going to happen?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Deciding who can vote in UK elections is a Cabinet Office competence. EU citizens currently have the right to vote in local elections and that will prevail until there is a change in primary legislation. However, such matters are for future discussion and negotiation, and I cannot set them out today.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Before I ask the Minister a question, Mr Speaker, I want to bring something to your attention. There are many EU citizens in Parliament today who were keen to hear this urgent question, but they are being told that the Gallery is full and that they cannot get in to watch proceedings. The Gallery is obviously not full, so I wanted to make you aware of that to see whether we can get a message to the Doorkeepers.

Mr Speaker: The Gallery is manifestly not full, and it would be much better if it were full. I hope that it will speedily become full in conformity with the wishes expressed by the hon. Gentleman, which I think would be endorsed across the House.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed, many of those EU citizens are here today because of the complete chaos and their worry about their futures, many of them having contributed to our society for decades. They are concerned about their immigration status, their right to work and their families here. Will the Minister admit that she gave incorrect evidence to the Home Affairs Committee the other day? Will she tell us how many EU citizens have already left the UK due to uncertainty around their status?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman is clearly a huge box-office draw if there are people outside still wanting to get in. He makes an important point—[Interruption.]

If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue, it is important to say, as set out by the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union in his appearance at the House of Lords EU Select Committee on 29 August, that we want EU citizens to stay. We still know that of course, many of those EU citizens are here today because of the complete chaos and their worry about their futures, many of them having contributed to our society for decades. They are concerned about their immigration status, their right to work and their families here. Will the Minister admit that she gave incorrect evidence to the Home Affairs Committee the other day? Will she tell us how many EU citizens have already left the UK due to uncertainty around their status?

Stephen Doughty: How many have left?

Caroline Nokes: I am just coming to the second part of the hon. Gentleman’s question. We still know that more EU citizens are coming than leaving—[Interruption.]

As the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), just indicated, more EU citizens are working in the NHS today than at the time of referendum.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Minister for clarifying that EU citizens’ rights will be protected in the event of both a deal and no deal. Some people have made the UK their permanent home but have to come and go either for their job or because they have caring responsibilities. Will those people be cared for?
Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There will be individuals who come and go. Through the settled status scheme, we are seeking to give people every opportunity to evidence their time in the UK by working with other Departments to cross-reference HMRC or Department for Work and Pensions records, for example. It is important to make a scheme that is easy for people to go through and that encourages those EU citizens who have contributed so much to our country to stay here. We want them to stay.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and the family reunion rights that have been set out in the withdrawal agreement are very important. We know that many EU citizens may have caring responsibilities or, indeed, children in a home country who might yet seek to come over. Those rights are enshrined in the offer we have made, and it is important that we continue to honour that offer and, indeed, work with those individuals so that they find going through the process as easy as possible.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the European partners of British citizens have to apply for settled status?

Caroline Nokes: I wonder whether my hon. Friend should declare an interest. Of course, EU nationals who are living here will need to go through the settled status scheme to make sure they have access to pension rights and settled status rights, as I have set out. Of course it is important that anyone who has been here for five years can apply for settled status straightaway, and those who have been here for less than five years will be able to apply for pre-settled status and can then apply for settled status once they have been here for five years.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Telling people that they are welcome just sounds hollow, given the terrible treatment meted out to Commonwealth citizens who were also once told that they were welcome but who did not have documents that they did not know they were supposed to have. What does the Minister think I should say to my EU constituents in Bristol West who, frankly, have no confidence at all in the Government’s proposals?

Caroline Nokes: People who go through the settled status scheme will be given a digital status so they can evidence that they have been through the scheme. I am very conscious—I believe I said this to the Home Affairs Committee last week—that there will be children born between now and 29 March 2019 who may well live to 120 and beyond, so we have to ensure that the settled scheme is enduring so that, potentially, for the next 100-plus years people will still be able to evidence their status.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that EU citizens who have made their lives in the UK continue to make a great contribution to our country? I sincerely hope that she agrees with me, because my father is one of them. He came here as an economic migrant just over 50 years ago, and he is not in any way unduly concerned about his status when we leave the EU.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing on his family experience. One of the most important things we can do to demonstrate our commitment is to open a settled status scheme, and we have done that. The scheme opened in August for the first private beta testing phase, and we are now in phase 2. There will be a third phase in January after a firebreak so that we can check that the scheme is working as we would want. I am delighted that we have already seen in the region of 1,000 people granted settled status.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Robin Adams is a British citizen and an EU citizen, as we all are at the moment. He is working as a lecturer in Sweden, and does not know whether he will be able to continue his work in Sweden or, if he returns, whether his wife, a US citizen, would be able to come back with him. He faces losing his home, his job and his family. What reassurance can the Minister offer him?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will have heard my answer earlier, and there continues to be ongoing work with European counterparts and the EU to make sure that they offer the same clarity and simple status that we have offered for EU citizens who are living here. The hon. Lady refers to her constituent’s US wife and, of course, under the Surinder Singh rules she will already be eligible to come here with him if they have been living in an EU state for a significant period of time.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If there is no deal, what will happen on 30 March 2019, when free movement will have ended, if an EU citizen presents himself at our borders?

Caroline Nokes: It is an important principle, as has been set out repeatedly, that we wish to be an outward-looking trading nation post Brexit. It is important, in my view, that we continue to allow EU citizens to use e-passport gates. Many hon. Members will have heard the Chancellor’s commitment in last week’s Budget to open up e-passport gates to further cohorts of nationalities. Of course, on day one of Brexit people will still be able to use their passport at e-passport gates as they travel into the UK.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister can answer for me the question already put by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) about the charges for EU citizens who have been trafficked here. What assessment has the Home Office made of the number of women trafficked for sex from Romania and whether we will now be charging them for the fact that they have been abused?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady raises an important and serious point about alleged victims of trafficking or modern slavery, and the issue has been raised with me. We have already made an offer that children in care should not have to pay the fee, we are looking very closely at this issue and I thank her for raising it.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister reassure me that she intends to take control of our borders—that was so important to so many in the referendum—while continuing to attract the brightest, the best and the needed? That is so important to employers in my constituency, especially agriculturalists, the tourism trade and the care industry.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend points out the importance of controlling our own borders and being able to bring forward, for the first time in more than a generation, an immigration policy that will enable us to determine who comes here based on their skills, not on their nationality. It is a really important point that we should continue to be able to attract the brightest and the best, and we will be setting out full details of the future immigration policy in a White Paper, and indeed an immigration Bill, coming very soon.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): At the moment, many, many British people living in EU countries are very apprehensive about their future. They currently have EU citizenship rights, which they will lose if there is no deal in March next year. What can the Minister say to reassure them? Is it not absurd that EU citizens in this country will have some protection, under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, but British people in the EU will have no protection whatsoever in the event of no deal?

Caroline Nokes: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are working hard to ensure that there is a deal, but he raises an important point, which I think I have addressed a couple of times already. This country has made an offer to EU citizens and we have made it very clear that we want them to stay, but the same cannot be said of some of our European counterparts. This matter is pressed with Ministers at every available opportunity, and indeed with ambassadors and the EU, because it is important that British citizens living in the EU27, the majority of whom are in France and Spain, are afforded the protections to which we believe they are entitled under the withdrawal agreement.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): About a third of my constituents came from eastern Europe over the past 10 to 15 years. They should take heart from the settled status scheme, but they deserve clarity as soon as possible and they often look to their own embassies rather than to the UK state. Will the Minister work with those embassies to get information to those people as quickly as possible from those sources and, crucially, in their own languages?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I have already met a number of ambassadors, particularly those from central and eastern European countries, impressing upon them the importance of communicating with the diaspora populations—and they do that. As I have travelled the country over the past few months and talked to EU citizens, particularly those employed in agriculture, I have been interested to find that many of them have already received communications on this subject and that they are very confident about how they should go through the settled status process.
hitting that level of numbers, but we will be able to test the scheme at an enormous scale. It is important that we have made that commitment and we want EU citizens to stay.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Home Secretary said yesterday that even in the event of no deal, employers will not be expected to differentiate between resident EU citizens and those who arrive after Brexit. Will the Minister therefore confirm that free movement will not end on 30 March next year?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said previously, right-to-work checks have to be carried out now for EU citizens and, indeed, for British nationals when they move to a new job. It is important that we set out the timetable for ending free movement, and the Prime Minister has been clear that we are going to do just that.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Many of the EU citizens who live in my constituency live in rural and even remote areas. They may not be aware of the support and advice that is available, or they may have difficulty accessing it. What steps will the Home Office take to make sure that EU residents in rural communities are made aware of the support available?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point about rural communities and remote areas. I referred earlier to the employers' toolkit, and I am conscious that many EU citizens may get information from their employer. I reassure my hon. Friend that a large-scale communication plan will indeed come into play when the settled status scheme is opened up more widely.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In the event of no deal, will free movement end on 29 March next year? If so, how will employers and others know what checks to make?

Caroline Nokes: As the Home Secretary explained, employers will have to continue to make the same right-to-work checks that they currently make. As I have now said several times, we will bring forward our plans to end free movement shortly.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The lives of hundreds of thousands of EU citizens in the UK have been blighted by this shambolic Brexit. Does the Minister agree that by ring-fencing EU citizens' rights now and paying for their settled status applications, we might go some way towards healing the hurt that has been inflicted on them as a result of Brexit and by this Government?

Caroline Nokes: I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman of the outcome of the referendum, when the British people voted for Brexit. The Government have a duty to uphold the British people's wishes. As I have said this afternoon, the settled status scheme is already open in its testing mode and has already conferred on more than 1,000 people their settled status.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Minister's answers today have revealed a shambles at the Home Office. Given that and given the state of policy, what reassurance can she really give to the thousands of EU residents in my constituency, to their families, many of whom are UK citizens as well, and to thousands of local employers?

Caroline Nokes: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was listening earlier when I said that the Home Office has delivered a settled status scheme that is up and running. Telling EU citizens that there is now a process for them to go through where they can confirm their status is exactly the sort of reassurance that we must give to them. Sadly, that is something that we have not seen across the rest of the EU.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): According to UK Music's recent Measuring Music report, the UK music industry exports rose by 7% to a record £2.6 billion last year. With 29 March fast approaching, it is more important than ever that we know how musicians and performers can continue working in the EU once the UK leaves, and how EU citizens can work in the UK. Will the Minister tell me what steps she has taken to achieve that?

Caroline Nokes: I am delighted to celebrate the increased exports of UK music and the phenomenal work that our artists, their producers, their tour companies and so on have managed to achieve over the past few years. It is important, as I have previously said, that we have a future immigration system. We are setting out the parliamentary timetable in due course and a White Paper will be published very shortly, which will clarify these matters.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are 1,500 EU nationals doing essential work for the Imperial College Healthcare Trust. In addition to having to go through the bureaucracy to get what they regard as second-class settled status, they would normally be charged a fee for that. The hospital trust itself will now pay at least £100,000 of that, which they have to do in order to retain these essential staff. Why should a trust, which is having real revenue and capital problems, have to pay that money? Why will the Government not pay that money?

Caroline Nokes: I do hope that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the fee for settled status was agreed with the EU.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I do not know whether the Minister is aware just how ludicrous it sounds to keep talking about bringing forward clarification “in due course” when we have just 20 weeks to go. She keeps repeating the fact that 1,000 EU citizens have so far gone through the settled status scheme, which I calculate is 0.03%. Will she tell us exactly how many people she expects to have achieved settled status before the end of March 2019?

Caroline Nokes: I hope to be able to explain to the hon. Lady that, of course, the settled status scheme opened in private beta testing. When we introduce a new large-scale scheme of this type, it is really important that we do so in a controlled way, which is why it has been only small numbers to date. As she will have heard me say, we are opening it up currently to in the region of 250,000 to 350,000 individuals employed by NHS trusts.
or indeed by the university sector. We know that there are 3.5 million people whom we wish to go through this scheme, and it is therefore really important that we get the testing right, and, of course, the scheme will be open until December 2020.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As well as “in due course”, the Minister has also used the phrases, “as soon as possible”, “shortly”, “very shortly”, and “in the next few weeks”. Does she understand that those phrases are meaningless and just further undermine the confidence of people who are affected by our leaving the EU on 29 March? Will she now please provide to the House and to those 3 million EU citizens a bit more certainty about the timetable that is in her mind to provide some certainty for those people?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary indicated that the White Paper will be coming forward in the autumn. The hon. Gentleman will be able to work out that we are in the autumn now, so perhaps he can have greater confidence that, when I say soon, I mean soon. However, he raises the 3.5 million EU citizens that we want to go through the settled status scheme to confirm the rights that we have offered to them. Of course, they have those rights, and that is not dependent on the future immigration system. We have opened the settled status scheme now to the testing cohorts and will be opening it more widely in the new year.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Immigration Minister has confirmed that there will be transitional arrangements for EU citizens even in the event of no deal. How long will those transitional arrangements last? Last week, I was treated by a nurse from Romania who had been here for many, many years, but she has asked her landlord to reduce her tenancy to a six-month rolling contract because she is terrified—in her words—that she will be “kicked out”.

Caroline Nokes: The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have all made it very clear that there will be no removals of EU citizens; we want them to stay. They are welcome here and they play an important role not just in our communities, but in our health service, as the hon. Lady pointed out. The settled status scheme is open in its testing phase and we will open it fully in the new year, but it is really important that we convey a message to everyone that we want EU citizens to stay. Seeking to sow seeds of uncertainty and division is actually really unhelpful to them.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If Brexit happens and a British citizen marries an EU citizen in the future, will they be subject to income tests as non-EEA citizens are currently?

Caroline Nokes: To quote the Prime Minister, their expectations will be different.
Universal Credit

4.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the changes announced to universal credit in the Budget last week and on the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018, which we are laying in the House today.

The Chancellor announced a substantial package at the Budget to ensure that millions of people keep more of what they earn, and vulnerable claimants are supported when they move to universal credit. In total, this package will be worth an extra £4.5 billion across the next five years. I pay special thanks to all the colleagues, charities, third-sector organisations, Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants who fed back to me in order to build this package of support to ensure that universal credit is a fair system, supporting thousands who cannot work as well as thousands who can. I also thank my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor for their support to deliver these measures.

Make no mistake: this is a Department that listens and a Department that will continue to listen, adapt, change and deliver. We will put an extra £1.7 billion a year into work allowances, increasing the amount that hard-working families can earn by £1,000 before universal credit is tapered away, providing extra support for 2.4 working families—1 mean, 2.4 million working families.

[Laughter.] Of course, the Opposition do not like helping hard-working families can earn by £1,000 before universal credit is tapered away, providing extra support for 2.4 working families—1 mean, 2.4 million working families. They are laughing because we help and support people into work.

The work allowance increase was welcomed not only in this House, but among charities. The Child Poverty Action Group said:

“The work allowance increase is unequivocally good news for families receiving universal credit”.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that this extra investment “will help make universal credit a tool for tackling poverty”.

And we have gone further, recognising the genuine concerns raised about the support we were offering people, especially the most vulnerable, when they moved to universal credit.

We have made a further £1 billion package of changes, providing two additional weeks of Department for Work and Pensions legacy benefits for those moved on to universal credit—a one-off non-repayable sum that will provide claimants with extra money during the period before they receive their first universal credit payment. This is on top of the two additional weeks of housing benefit announced at autumn Budget 2017 and put into place this year.

We will also support the self-employed in moving to universal credit. We will open up a 12-month grace period before the minimum income floor is applied, supporting 130,000 self-employed claimants—because we are the party of business; the party of aspiration. We will support those in debt by reducing the normal maximum rate at which debts are deducted from universal credit awards from 40% to 30% of standard allowances. This will help over 600,000 families to manage their debts at any one point when roll-out is complete, providing them with, on average, £295 extra a year as their debts are repaid over a longer period.

This is targeted support to help work pay and support the vulnerable, which is why today I lay regulations to deliver the next phase of universal credit—managed migration, through which people will be moved on to universal credit. That is a move from a system that trapped people on benefits and created cliff edges at 16, 24 and 30 hours with punitive effective tax rates of over 90% for some. Under Labour, between 1997 and 2010, benefit spend went up by 65%. In 1997, households were paying £5,500 in taxes to fund the benefits system—and by 2010, the figure had risen to £8,350. The Conservative party was voted into office to manage the country’s finances and get them under control, and also to make sure that the benefits bill was affordable and sustainable for the future. While Labour Members may hanker for the dark old days of trapping people on benefits, excluding them from the opportunity of work and getting on in life, and at the same time delivering a big bill to the taxpayer, we do not. Under this Government, 3.4 million more people are in work, and the vast majority of those jobs are full-time permanent roles. This means that we have created more new jobs in the UK since 2010 than France, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and Norway combined.

Through universal credit, about 1 million disabled households will receive about £100 extra, on average, per month through more generous support. The Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018 will, in addition, protect 500,000 people’s severe disability premium at the point of migration, and deliver transitional protection for those we move to ensure that, at the point of moving, those managed-migrated have their entitlements protected. We will take a measured approach to delivering managed migration, taking our time to get it right and working with claimants to co-design it.

We have taken on board, and will continue to do so, the advice of experts and charities such as the Social Security Advisory Committee, whose report on the regulations we have published, along with our response, today. We have accepted, in full or in part, all but one of its recommendations—and the one we did not accept is because we want to make it more generous. I pay tribute to the hard work of the SSAC in scrutinising our regulations.

We have changed a key part of the regulations, as charities have asked me, MPs and the Department, relating to the minimum statutory notice period for people moving from their legacy award to universal credit. We have extended this period from a minimum of one month to a minimum of three months to allow claimants maximum time to prepare and make their claim before their legacy award expires. Alongside this, we have unlimited flexibility to extend claim periods for people who need it. We will backdate any claimant who has missed the deadline date but has made a claim within a month of the deadline day passing. We will test a variety of communication methods, including advertising campaigns, face-to-face communication, letters, texts, telephone calls and home visits, to provide support for claimants during managed migration. We will constantly review our approaches, engaging fully with charities, experts, claimants and all Members of the House. I commend this statement to the House.
4.33 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I would like to pay tribute to all the individuals, charities and Members of the House who have been holding the Government to account over their chaotic and damaging universal credit programme, which is pushing families into poverty.

In June, the National Audit Office published a damning report on universal credit. We know that the roll-out of the benefit is leading to people building up debt and rent arrears or being forced to turn to food banks for help. The Budget last week did little to address the very long wait for payments, which is causing significant hardship. Despite that, the Government are now planning to start the next phase of the introduction of universal credit, which they call managed migration, involving the transfer of 2.87 million people on to it.

Under the draft regulations, existing claimants will be sent a letter saying that their benefits will stop and they will need to make a new universal credit claim by a specific deadline. It is wholly unacceptable that the Government are shifting responsibility for ensuring that people get the help they need away from the Government and on to the shoulders of nearly 3 million claimants. It is no wonder that 80 organisations representing disabled people are calling for the Government to change tack. Learning disability charity Mencap has said that the proposals leave disabled people “vulnerable to having their benefits stopped before they have made a successful claim”.

More than 400 organisations have responded to the Social Security Advisory Committee’s consultation on the managed migration regulations—a record number for the committee, which demonstrates the strength of concern about this issue.

Parliament is being asked to approve regulations that it may have very little chance at all to scrutinise and debate, even though the details of how the process will take place are not yet settled. When asked by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee on 18 October whether the regulations would be debated, the Minister for Employment answered:

“We need to have a debate in the House.”

It was clear from the context that the Chair meant a debate in the main Chamber. However, the shadow Leader of the House raised the issue at business questions on 11, 18 and 25 October without receiving a clear assurance that that would be the case. That is all the more important since Government Members make up a majority of the MPs in Committees, even though they do not have an overall majority in Parliament.

Let us step back and get a broad view of the Government’s supposed flagship social security programme. Universal credit was supposed to lift 350,000 children out of poverty. Instead, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, an extra 1.2 million children may be growing up in poverty by the end of this Parliament. Universal credit was supposed to deliver work incentives and ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions will never know whether universal credit leads to more people in work. Universal credit was supposed to simplify the social security system, but instead, around three in 10 claims of universal credit are closed and not paid, within a system that is complex and that people find difficult to navigate. This statement does nothing to address that.

The Government claim that 1 million disabled households will receive an extra £100 a month as a result of universal credit. What the Secretary of State has failed to tell the House is that the same report by the Office for Budget Responsibility reveals that around 1 million sick and disabled households will lose an average of £2,608 a year, or £217 a month.

Universal credit is failing. The Opposition have consistently called on the Government to stop the roll-out, but the Government are pressing ahead, despite the terrible hardship it is causing. We have a right to ask questions on behalf of our constituents, including whether the universal credit managed migration regulations will be debated in full on the Floor of the House so that all MPs get a chance to scrutinise and debate this critical draft legislation.

The Secretary of State says that the Government have accepted all but one of the Social Security Advisory Committee’s recommendations. That is highly questionable. For example, what new action will the Government take to support people who struggle to make and manage a claim online? Will the Department publish the more than 400 responses to the Social Security Advisory Committee’s consultation, to ensure maximum transparency? The Secretary of State must assure the House that there are sufficient safeguards in place to ensure that no existing legacy benefit claimants end up falling into destitution and that none falls out of the social security system altogether.

Given the potential impact of the draft regulations on claimants’ incomes, the large number of people affected and the strength of opposition to the proposals in their current form, it is a matter of real concern that they will receive such little scrutiny by Members. Members are extremely concerned about the impact that universal credit is having on people living in their constituencies. They must be given the opportunity to debate and vote on these regulations on the Floor of the House.

Ms McVey: While the Opposition cannot bring themselves to commend the extra £4.5 billion going into universal credit, let me read out what some independent charities have been saying. The Resolution Foundation has hailed this a “very welcome” £1.7 billion commitment. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that this extra investment is “a tool for tackling poverty”. The Trussell Trust has talked about “significant improvements that will make a real difference to many people supported by universal credit”. The Child Poverty Action Group called this “unequivocally good news for families receiving universal credit”. Other charities have been saying that the Department is now listening to what claimants, charities and MPs are saying. The Trussell Trust has said that. Gingerbread has said that. Mind has said that. Mencap has said that. I would also point out that an extra 1 million disabled people will be getting an extra £100 a month, and that 700,000 people who did not get all they should under the legacy benefits will get nearly an extra £300 a month. There are now 3.4 million more people in work. That is what we do: we help people into work. Youth
unemployment has gone down by 50% since 2010—that
gives young people a future, it gives them hope and it
gives them a job—and that is happening under this
Government.

I came into politics for social mobility. Social mobility
is about moving forward and getting a job. There is no
social mobility on benefits—there is no mobility on
benefits. That is what this party believes in. It is the way
to get out of poverty. That is why we welcome the extra
£4.5 billion. The Opposition have asked for a debate on the
Floor of the House, and, of course, there will be a
debate on the Floor of the House. We believe in
transparency. We are open and straight talking. We say
it as it is.

We will be co-designing what happens with claimants.
In the words of the publication that the OBR has put
out on the Budget, by 2023-24 we will be spending an
extra £2 billion on universal credit than on the system it
replaces. I want to say a final word on debt under
Labour: between 1997 and 2010, benefit claimants’ debt
to local authorities increased by £1.8 billion through
overpayments and errors in the legacy system, and
£5.86 billion of debt was accrued on tax credits. That is
a shameful record for the Opposition of putting claimants
into debt on benefits and tax credits.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is much interest in this
subject, but I remind the House that there is a further
statement to follow and then two important debates.
There is therefore a premium on brevity, which will be
caracteristically and brilliantly exemplified by the right
hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening).

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I very much welcome
the additional investment in universal credit in the
Budget. Like many Members, I have met the DWP,
Jobcentre Plus and citizens advice bureaux locally to
talk about the roll-out of universal credit. It is obviously
hugely important that people avoid going into debt
unnecessarily, and I very much welcome the co-design
approach to managed migration that the Secretary of
State has set out. Will she say which groups are likely to
be migrated first, and on what basis?

Ms McVey: I thank my right hon. Friend. For a year
from next July we will be having a trial period or test
period, working with 10,000 claimants to see exactly the
way in which it should be done—for example, should it
be done for the most vulnerable groups or should it be
done geographically?—and to make sure that we get it
right. That is how we work: we make sure that it works;
we do not just go forward with an idea—[ Interruption.]
There is clustering from the Opposition Front Bench.
We will work with claimants to make sure it works for
them.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank
the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.
The work allowance boost that we are being told we
should welcome only undoes or reverses half the cut
that was made in 2015. It is like taking £100 away from
somebody, giving them 50 quid back and saying, “You
should be grateful that I’ve given you 50 quid back.”
The reality is that people are still worse off. The benefit
freeze is still in place.

The sanctions regime is also still in place. I am
particularly concerned about the methods of
communication for universal credit. I have seen a number
of people who come to my surgeries with mental health
problems particularly—they cannot open letters or deal
with having to jump through the hoops that are put in
their way—who are then sanctioned because they are
literally unable to jump through those hoops. I hope
that the Secretary of State will look at all these issues.
She has mentioned communication methods, and I very
much hope she will put that at the centre of the decision-
making process for communication.

On the exact amount of money that has been allocated
for universal credit, it seems to me that nothing has
been done on the basis of how much people actually
need to live on. If it had, there would not be a huge
increase in the number of people going to food banks
and there would not be the incredible number of sanctions
that we see. Rather than the Treasury deciding how
much money should go to universal credit and the
Department for Work and Pensions then divvying it up,
it would be better to make decisions on the basis of how
much people need to live on and what amount of
money would encourage people to get into work.

We need to ensure that people are not going to food
banks, that families are not in poverty and that young
people are not starving as a result of the Government’s
policies.

Ms McVey: As I said previously, when we came into
office, we had to take an overview of Government
spending, full stop. We were voted into office to get this
country’s finances under control. One of the decisions
that we had to make was on the size of the benefit bill
because it had grown by 65% under the previous Labour
Government. We took hold of that, and decisions were
made across the board— I have never shied away from
that. Again, in 2015, further decisions were made after a
general election. The Opposition did not vote against
the changes and cuts. Their Whips’ advice on that day
was to abstain. Some broke ranks, but generally they
did not.

Those changes are now coming through, but I said
that I would go out, meet people, listen, learn and see
what we could do and afford, and that is why an extra
£4.5 billion has gone into universal credit. I look at
what people are saying and why they have welcomed the
increase. I reiterate that there are 3.4 million extra
people in work and that we are targeting the money at
the most vulnerable.

The hon. Lady is right about communication, which
is key. That is why we will work with charities to get it
right.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In easing the passage to
universal credit, there is a great role for jobcentre staff.
The problem is that I do not have a jobcentre in my
constituency. Will my right hon. Friend bring forward
the idea of mobile jobcentres to help the transition and
manage the process?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend makes a very good
point—he has probably been reading my mind. Outreach
work is key: how do we get to the most vulnerable,
whether people in isolated parts of the country or those
with learning difficulties or transport difficulties? We will
look at outreach work and perhaps a mobile bus. We should look at new, good ideas for connecting with our claimants.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for the money she managed to claw back from the Treasury—I advise her for her own safety not to take routes home in the dark that pass the Treasury. A crucial element of her statement was the one-off, non-repayable sum for claimants who have been transferred to universal credit. Will she give the House an assurance that the sum—non-repayable, therefore incurring no debt—will be equivalent to the sorts of sums people would get if they were already on universal credit?

Ms McVey: We have made sure that that will be people’s benefit going forward. As I said, it is the sum that they need when they adjust from two to four weeks and it is, as the right hon. Gentleman said, non-returnable. That is to ensure that people can balance the money when moving from a two-week to a four-week payment. It is extra money.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I know better than most how hard the Secretary of State worked to get support from the Chancellor in the Budget. I commend her for doing that. Will she assure my constituents that the welfare bill will not once again spiral out of control, as it did under the previous Labour Government, taking money away from hard-working taxpayers?

Ms McVey: The Conservative party is always about balancing fairness for everybody: fairness to the taxpayers paying the bill as well fairness to those getting benefits and those going into work. I thank my hon. Friend Philip Davies for his question. Gentleman said, non-returnable. That is to ensure that people can balance the money when moving from a two-week to a four-week payment. It is extra money.

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Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I strongly disagree with the Secretary of State. Universal credit is not getting residents out of poverty. I say that because a constituent of mine, who has mental health problems, contacted me this morning. He was moved over to universal credit and fell into housing arrears, which is exacerbating his mental health condition. It is very distressing for him. For those people unable to self-identify for managed migration, how will they acquire additional support? I do not think it is good enough that people are being tested out and then this is failing them.

Ms McVey: If the hon. Lady would like to meet to discuss what has happened to her constituent and how we can support him, I am more than happy to do so. Equally, I know that a lot of people are coming to universal credit with debt—it is not due to universal credit, but what they come with. Maybe together we can work to support that person.

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Ms McVey: If the hon. Lady had been here for the statement, she may have been able to follow this through. [Interruption.] A bit late coming in, as my hon. Friends have confirmed to me. [Interruption.]

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Universal credit rolled out a couple of weeks ago in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that the money she announced today will make a particular difference to people in my constituency who are often paid weekly or fortnightly, rather than monthly? It is often they who are the most vulnerable and who need the most help.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Secretary of State responds to her hon. Friend, I am sure that what she said she said in all sincerity, but I am 99.9% certain in my own mind that the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) was here at the start of—[Interruption.] Order. I am not debating the point with the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). [Interruption.] Order. No facial expressions are required. I am just telling him and the House the situation. The hon. Lady was here—end of.

Ms McVey: It seems a moot point on both sides of the House whether or not the hon. Lady was here, but that being the case she will know that we have put an extra £4.5 billion into the system to support transitional protection. That is exactly what a fair Government would do: provide the correct transitional protection.

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Mr Speaker: I would quite like to lighten the tension on this matter. May I just say to hon. Members, for the avoidance of doubt, that perambulation in the Chamber from one row to another is not an entirely novel phenomenon? May I say to the hon. Member for North Dorset, who is an old friend in the House of Commons, that it is not uncomon? The fact that a Member perambulates from one Bench to another does not mean that that Member has exited the Chamber. As far as I am concerned, the hon. Lady did not exit the Chamber.
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Secretary of State quoted the Child Poverty Action Group a couple of times, but she failed to mention that in the same press release, it also said that “unless there is a further fundamental re-think of how universal credit works—and robust safeguards in place before it is scaled-up—people will continue to be pushed into debt and driven to food banks as part of their claim.” Why did she omit that bit?

Ms McVey: Having met this charity group, too, I have said that I will work with it so that when we can, we listen, change and adapt what we need to do, which we have done so far since I have been in office, and we have the extra money through the Budget. That is what I am prepared to do.

Mr Speaker: I call a Member not given to perambulation—Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am not certain what the attitude towards gambling is in the Secretary of State’s household, but would she care to place a bet that if the universal credit system is up and running and if, heaven forbid, the Labour party comes into government, it will be most unlikely to replace it with a mish-mash of different cross-cutting benefits such as existed previously?

Ms McVey: That is a very good question, because it seems that Opposition Members do not really know what they are going to do. It seems that the shadow Chancellor is going to get rid of it and the shadow Secretary of State is not really sure, but I know that in the Lords, they want to keep it. Perhaps when the next person stands up, they will tell us exactly what the Opposition Front Benchers are going to do with universal credit.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Universal credit is due to start in my constituency in just a few weeks’ time. Local families and local advice services and food bank volunteers are all deeply concerned about what this will mean and about their ability to provide support for people in the run-up to Christmas. Given that the Secretary of State has had to admit that there are a whole series of problems with the policy, which is why she had to bring forward a whole series of changes—even though they do not go far enough—will she please recognise the risks to families in my constituency at Christmas and halt this introduction now, so that we can make sure that more families are not pushed into debt and poverty at such an important family time?

Ms McVey: I wonder whether I could invite the right hon. Lady to go to see the work that Jobcentre Plus and the work coaches are doing and how they are helping an extra 1,000 people each and every day into work and, equally, how they are working with the most vulnerable to sort them. If I did what she said and stopped the roll-out, it would mean that 1 million disabled people who would possibly be getting an extra £100 would not be getting it, and that those 700,000 people who have not got the right amount of benefit—nearly £300 a month—would not be getting it.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Can I just get this right? Is it correct that our country gives more family benefits to our people who need them than any other developed country? [Interruption.]

Ms McVey: Actually, for family benefits, my hon. Friend is correct—it is more than any advanced nation. We give more in benefits to families; he is correct.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The full service roll-out of universal credit began in my constituency in July last year. People who are moving from legacy benefits on to universal credit are being made worse off. How on earth can a system incentivise work if it is making people in work poorer?

Ms McVey: What it is doing is supporting more people into work—3.4 million. By bringing in the work allowance—£1.7 billion a year—we are now able to focus extra support on families with children and supporting disabled people. Therefore, it will be even more beneficial to them going forward. That is positive support that we are giving through the Budget changes.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Universal credit came to Willenhall two weeks ago. Of the 157 cases we have had so far, only three are a waiting processing for payment. Can the Secretary of State explain why it seems to be going so smoothly, given that Opposition Members assure us it is a disaster?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend, who has actually visited his jobcentre plus to find out what is happening on the ground, gives a truer reflection of what is happening on the ground. I have spent most of this year travelling from Brighton up to Angus in Scotland and meeting jobcentre coaches, and most of them are telling me that universal credit is working for the vast majority of people, but I wanted to make sure we got extra money from the Chancellor in the Budget to help the vulnerable people it maybe was not helping.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that her Department has agreed with the Social Security Advisory Committee’s recommendations about telephone claims for universal credit, but we know that DWP contact centre staff are concerned that having to deal with such high call volumes might mean they cannot process claims. How many additional staff will be required in DWP contact centres to deal with telephone claims for universal credit?

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. That is another thing we will look at during the managed migration, as we expand the system and more people come on to universal credit—how many more people do we need in call centres; how many more work coaches?—because we will need the right number to give a good service.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The full service roll-out of universal credit began in my constituency in July last year. People who are moving from legacy benefits on to universal credit are being made worse off. How on earth can a system incentivise work if it is making people in work poorer?

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Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Everybody claiming universal credit has to wait at least five weeks before being entitled to payments, including those being moved across from previous benefits. The Secretary of State referred to the additional two weeks of previous benefits announced by the Chancellor in the Budget. How can Ministers justify stopping all benefits for a period of at least three weeks for people migrating from previous benefits on to universal credit?

Ms McVey: It will be a continuum. The payment cycle will be going from two weeks to four weeks, and this is actually extra money. They will be getting two weeks’ extra money because they will be getting the full period they are entitled to when it comes along after four weeks. This is not giving them less money, or even part of their money; this is two weeks’ extra benefit.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Some of the most vulnerable in our communities will always look to their citizens advice bureau for help and assistance on these matters. The announcements by our right hon. Friend the Chancellor last week, and confirmed by the Secretary of State today, are incredibly welcome. What plans do she and her Department have to explain to our local CABs the nature of the changes and the benefits that will accrue from them to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in our communities have a happy experience of universal credit, not one like the Opposition describe?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises a good point, and that is why we worked in partnership with Citizens Advice across the country—so it could help people get on to universal credit. We felt it was the correct thing to do. It works with the most vulnerable people—it knows them—and is a trusted independent group. That is why we chose it to work with.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome the announcement on reducing the deduction rate for the repayment of debt, but 30% of someone’s benefit is still quite a lot to be paying back on debt repayment. Will the Secretary of State take seriously the suggestion in the report of the Work and Pensions Committee last week that debt advice becomes a core part of the universal support offer?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady, who knows a lot about this subject, is correct about the debt advice and the support that is available. We are building in measures to help more people to obtain debt advice. They often do not like asking for it as such, so we are going to change the term to “money advice”. Many people do not like to admit that they are in debt, even if they are.

Let me clear up one point. We are not talking about 30% of the entire benefit; we are talking about 30% of the standard allowance. Obviously, that does not include housing or childcare. It is a significant reduction in the rate, led by calls from the Trussell Trust.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Universal credit has already been fully rolled out in my constituency, and for the majority of people it is working; but, more important, more people are working too. Does my right hon. Friend agree that universal credit can also empower people to work more hours, which has got to be good for their self-esteem?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right. This benefit is about empowering people. It is about helping them to take on work, or extra work. Under the legacy systems, people were locked out of work even if they wanted to do it. We know that there are about 113 million extra hours of work out there. We also know that there is a record number of vacancies in the economy. We can help people, get them a career, get them on the jobs ladder, and get them doing what they want to do in this world.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Analysis of the universal credit measures in the Budget shows that more than 3 million households will still be worse off, especially disabled people and the self-employed. Following the High Court judgment compelling the Secretary of State to provide transitional protections for disabled people migrating on to universal credit, what is her response to the comment on page 76 of the Social Security Advisory Committee’s report that her proposals leave disabled people worse off and need “further consideration”?

Ms McVey: I hope that the hon. Lady will be voting for the changes that may give 1 million more disabled people an extra £100 a month, and the extra protection for the severe disability premium for 500,000 people, which is key. As I have always said, should we need to give any more support for vulnerable groups, we will work—and I will work with the Chancellor—to ensure that that happens. However, I commend to the hon. Lady the managed migration regulations, which, as she will see, provide for significantly more support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Opposition love to talk about benefit cuts. Will the Secretary of State—by confirming that, as a result of the measures in the Budget, spending on universal credit, when it is fully rolled out, will be £2 billion a year more than spending on the equivalent legacy benefits, and that this will be worth £300 a year to each universal credit family?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right. That was in the forecast for 2023-24 in the Office for Budget Responsibility’s Budget report. We are a party that is fair to the most vulnerable and supports the rest into work. To be honest, I do not know why Opposition Members are voting against helping the most vulnerable and giving them more support than they would be given by the legacy benefits.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is very little chance now that everyone will be able to get in, but there is a flicker of a chance if people ask one-sentence questions.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a miracle that someone who has had no social mobility and has lived on benefits can be called in the House, but I managed to make it here on those legacy benefits, and managed to get the same fancy job as the Members over there, so I am not sure what they are talking about.
I want to ask the Secretary of State about my constituent who was raped by the man with whom she lived and who therefore had to move. She was forced on to universal credit because of a change in her circumstances. She works—she has always worked—and she is £200 worse off. She is a single mother. What is being offered to her today—and this is why we are not supporting it—will still leave her £160 a month worse off. This is a rape victim, a single mother who is in work. What will the Secretary of State do for her?

Ms McVey: I would like to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the matter, and to meet this person to see what we can do to support and help her. She has obviously been through a lot.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the progress that my right hon. Friend has made in securing changes that support people in a better way. There will have to be a number of votes on the measures that she is proposing. What does she think people will not be getting if Members decide not to back the changes that she is advocating?

Ms McVey: That is a crucial question. If people do not vote for these changes, it will mean the most vulnerable not being helped, it will mean 1 million disabled people not getting £100 a month, it will mean disabled people not getting severe disability premium, and it will mean 700,000 people not getting their full benefit and being supported as well, in addition to the other measures I mentioned. I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I commend the Secretary of State for making her statement to the House. I also note with approval the list of organisations that the Secretary of State said had come out and supported the Government putting back in the £1.7 billion for UC from the £3 billion cut in 2015. I note that I and my party were not in that list, but I am sure the Secretary of State will remember that since the election I have been saying again and again that to make work pay we have to bring back the full £3 billion. Will the Secretary of State commit to the further £1.3 billion that will really make work pay?

Ms McVey: We are making work pay. That is why more people are going into work. We are also changing the system significantly so that people are not trapped on benefits. We are making the system as fair as we can for those on benefits and those paying for it, and we are also protecting the most vulnerable; that is what we are doing.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for showing once again that she is listening and is prepared to change and improve things as we go along, because these changes have been hugely welcomed by DWP staff in my constituency and constituents on UC, and indeed by many charities who work with the most vulnerable. Does the Secretary of State share my surprise that the one group of people who seem unable to welcome these changes are the Opposition?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend makes a great point. They have also been unable to welcome the extra 3.4 million people in work, a reduction of youth unemployment by 50%, and the record numbers of women into work and of BME—black and minority ethnic—people into work. I do not know what they would welcome.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The reason why we have these concerns is because of cases like this: a constituent of mine—a single mother of a terminally ill child aged 2—had her application for income support lost by the DWP, was then forced to claim UC, and while that was being considered all her benefits were stopped and she was forced to live on her son’s DLA and her carer’s allowance for her terminally ill son. Does the Secretary of State think that sort of case is acceptable and why is she pushing ahead given that cases like this have arisen?

Ms McVey: We have always said that we will deal with such cases. When fully rolled out, we will have up to about 8 million people here and we get it right most of the time for most of the people, but should something go wrong—and obviously something has gone wrong there—people come to their MP, which is only right, and then they bring the case to me and the Department and we get it right. But no system in the world is 100% right for 100% of people, and I apologise when it goes wrong, and then we will fight to get it right.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I have been interested to hear the Secretary of State’s responses to a number of questions. How many recommendations from the Social Security Advisory Committee has her Department accepted?

Ms McVey: We have accepted all but one of them, and in the one we did not accept we have been more generous, if you can believe it. So we have accepted nearly all of them, except one, and that one we have been more generous towards.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): A constituent of mine recovering from cancer came to see me. She had literally no money for food because at the moment UC is so badly designed that those whose pay date coincides with their claim date get no money at all in two months of the year. Before the roll-out, will the Secretary of State correct this design fault?

Ms McVey: In those instances we are working with the individual and then helping them with a manual workaround to make sure they are back on benefit and we are supporting those people. As I have said, it is never going to be a system that is right 100% of the time for 100% of people, but it is working the vast majority of the time for the vast majority of people. That is why people are saying up and down the country, “This is working; I’m getting into work.” In fact, this is the single thing that claimants say to me who have been unemployed before—eight years ago—and are now coming back to the job centre. They say that because of the scare stories from the Opposition, they have been frightened to go into—

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—
Mr Speaker: Order. Points of order come after statements.

Ms McVey: They have been frightened to go into the jobcentre. I have many letters from people saying thank goodness we did this, because it is so much better than the legacy system it replaces.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The full service was rolled out in Greenwich on 3 October and I am extremely concerned about the number of people locally who appear to be claiming universal credit when it is not necessary for them to do so and who are worse off as a result. What more can the Secretary of State's Department do, particularly in terms of training and information sharing among organisations on the ground, to ensure that only those who need to claim universal credit are doing so?

Ms McVey: This is the new system, and people will be claiming universal credit as it rolls out to their jobcentre. This is a modern system that helps people into work and helps the most vulnerable. Probably the best thing that the hon. Gentleman could do is to work with them to ensure that they are on the system and that it is working for them.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State more than a month ago about an anomaly drawn to my attention by my local citizens advice bureau—namely, the difference for women on maternity allowance as opposed to maternity pay. Has she managed to resolve that issue, because many women are worse off as a result of this policy?

Ms McVey: I will go back to the Department now and ensure that the right hon. Gentleman gets a reply to that letter.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester was an early roll-out area for universal credit, so let me tell the Secretary of State how the migration has been going. A constituent of mine lost her husband; he died suddenly leaving her with a primary school-aged child. She was on a widow’s pension and tax credits, and was just about managing, but she was then told to go on to universal credit. She is now £250 a month worse off and she is going to lose her house. My question to the Secretary of State is this: can she have her money back?

Ms McVey: No, but as the hon. Gentleman and I live only up the road from each other, let us meet and see this person and see what we can do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Child poverty and street homelessness are both going up, so I would like the Secretary of State to put on record her prediction for the future under the new universal credit system. Will child poverty and street homelessness fall or rise?

Ms McVey: At the moment, there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty and, under this Government, nearly 1 million fewer children are growing up in workless households. We believe that work is the best way out of poverty, and having a role model in the house who is working is the best way to get out of poverty too.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) rose—

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! Two distinguished ornaments of the Opposition Whips Office—what a difficult choice! I call Mr Chris Elmore.

Chris Elmore: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Further to the shadow Secretary of State’s question about the managed migration regulations, will the Secretary of State confirm—yes or no will do—that this will be debated on the Floor of the House and not in Committee?

Ms McVey: Yes.

Nic Dakin: Waiting to get their universal credit is causing people huge problems. Will the Secretary of State do everything she can to address that problem, because it is the main thing that comes up when people come to see me every week—almost every day—with their problems about the universal credit roll-out?

Ms McVey: Absolutely, yes. Obviously, the Secretary of State before me brought in advances.
Prevention of Ill Health: Government Vision

5.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Last week, the Chancellor confirmed that the NHS budget would rise by £20.5 billion over the next five years, because we care about the NHS being there for everyone. As well as money, however, reform is crucial. Before Christmas, we will bring forward a long-term plan for the NHS. We know that so much of what contributes to good health comes not just from what happens when someone is in hospital but from what we do to stay out of hospital. Prevention is better than cure. Today I have laid before the House our vision for the prevention of ill health. It covers what the NHS needs to do, including more funding for community and primary care and the better use of technology. The plan also outlines what we need to see more broadly; everyone has a part to play.

As well as the rights we have as citizens to access NHS services free at the point of use, we all have responsibilities, too. Individuals have responsibilities, and we want to empower people to make the right choices. For instance, smoking costs the NHS £2.5 billion each year and contributes to 4% of hospital admissions. That is despite the massive reduction in smoking over the past 30 years. The next step to a smoke-free society is targeted anti-smoking interventions, especially in hospitals.

As well as stopping smoking, we must tackle excess salt. Salt intake has fallen 11% over just under a decade, but if it fell by a third, that would prevent 8,000 premature deaths and save the NHS over £500 million annually. We are working on new solutions to tackle salt, and we will set out more details by Easter and deliver on chapter 2 of our obesity plan, too.

Next, prevention can save money and eliminate waste. At the moment, it takes too long, with too many invasive tests, to diagnose some illnesses. Doctors often have to try several different treatments before they alight on what is right for a patient. However, two new technologies—artificial intelligence and genomics—have the potential to change that. I want predictive prevention to help prevent people from becoming patients and to deliver more targeted interventions, with better results, when people do fall ill. Instead of simply broadcasting messages to the nation, technology allows us to support much more targeted advice, messages and interventions for those most at risk.

Turning to environmental factors, our health is not determined only by what happens in hospitals. In fact, only a minority of the impact on anyone’s healthy lifespan is delivered by what hospitals do. The other factors include the air we breathe, whether someone has a job and the quality of our housing. That means our GP surgeries, our hospitals and our care homes all working more closely with local authorities, schools, businesses, charities and other parts of our communities. Of course, the record number of people in work is good news on that front, and employers have a big role in helping their staff to stay healthy and to return to health after illness. That is where we can learn from the excellent record of our brave armed services, which have an 85% return-to-work rate after serious injury, while the equivalent rate for civilians in only 35%.

Building on all that, the Government will next year publish a Green Paper on prevention, which will set out the plans in greater detail. This is all part of our long-term plan for the future of the NHS.

If I may, Mr Speaker, I will now address two separate issues that I know are of interest across the House today: the treatment of those with learning difficulties and autism, and the medical use of cannabis. Since becoming Health and Social Care Secretary, I have been shocked by some of the care received by those with autism and learning difficulties. Where people deserve compassion and dignity, they have been treated like criminals, and that must stop. Like everyone across the House, I have been moved by the cases of Bethany, Stephen and so many others, whose stories have laid bare what is wrong with our system and what needs to change. I have instituted a serious incident review, but this is not just about individual cases; it is about the system.

Three years ago, the Government committed to reducing the number of people with learning disabilities or autism in secure mental health hospitals by at least a third. Currently, it is now down by a fifth, but that still leaves 2,315 people with learning disabilities or autism in mental health hospitals. I want to see that number drastically reduce. I have asked the NHS to address that in the long-term plan, and I know that its leadership shares my determination to get this right. I have also instigated a Care Quality Commission review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and segregation. The long-term use of seclusion is unacceptable both medically and ethically. It must stop. The review will recommend how to protect vulnerable people better and how to ensure that everyone is cared for with the compassion, respect and dignity they deserve.

On the prescription of medicinal cannabis, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) for their campaigning on this issue. We have changed the law to make it possible to prescribe medicinal cannabis where clinically appropriate. Urgent cases have been brought to my attention, including concerns that those who have received treatment on an exceptional basis are now being denied that treatment. There is no reason for that to happen. The treatment of each individual patient is and must be down to the decision of the specialist doctor, working with patients and their family to determine the best course of treatment for them.

I met the head of the NHS on that this morning, and I have immediately instigated a system of second opinions. We have put out a call for research to develop the evidence, and we have also commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to produce further clinical guidance on this issue. No one who currently gets medicinal cannabis should be denied it, and there is a system in place now for those who need to get it in future.

We want to deliver the best possible care to the most vulnerable, and we want to help build a more sustainable health and care system for all. Today’s announcements will help to do that, and I commend this statement to the House.
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. We welcome his remarks on the use of medicinal cannabis and on the appalling, barbaric abuses of those with learning disabilities and autism, by which we have all been shocked. I understand his point about the review and about asking NHS England to carry out some work, but is it not time that these institutions were closed down and proper support provided in the community instead?

Of course we welcome the emphasis and focus on prevention, but these promises are not worth a candle if they are not backed up with real, substantive action. They come on the back of £700 million-worth of cuts to public health services, with more cuts to public health services pencilled in for next year, including £17 million-worth of cuts to sexual health services, £34 million-worth of cuts to drug and alcohol services, £3 million-worth of cuts to smoking cessation services and £1 million-worth of cuts to obesity services.

The Secretary of State did not mention childhood obesity in his remarks.

Matt Hancock indicated dissent.

Jonathan Ashworth: I apologise if I missed it. Could the Secretary of State tell us when he plans to outlaw or ban the advertising of junk food on family television and when the consultation will end?

Immunisation rates for children have fallen for the fourth year in a row, so a big part of prevention should surely be a focus on investment in children’s and early years health services, yet Government cuts to those budgets and, indeed, the privatisation of many of those services in our communities have seen health visitor numbers fall by more than 2,000, school nurse numbers go down by 700 and 11% of babies miss out on mandated health checks. What is the Secretary of State’s plan to reverse those cuts to health visitors and school nurses?

All in all, alongside wider Department of Health and Social Care budgets, there will be £1 billion-worth of cuts to health services next year, with public health budgets taking considerable strain. Those £1 billion-worth of cuts should have been abandoned today, and it is a missed opportunity that the Secretary of State has not abandoned them. When he was asked about this in the Budget debate, he said it was a matter for the spending review. Well, today the Association of Directors of Public Health has said that the spending review should allocate an extra £3.2 billion for the public health grant next year. Does he accept that figure?

Of course prevention is about more than just public health; it is also about primary care. But GP numbers are down by 1,000 since 2015, and since 2010 district nurses have been cut by more than 3,000, so can the Secretary of State tell us what his plan is to increase the primary care workforce to support his wider ambitions on prevention? We know he wants a higher proportion of NHS spending to go to general practice, so does he agree with GPs that general practice should again receive around 11% of the overall NHS budget? If not, why not?

Of course, prevention is also about mental health services, but 30% of patients referred to IAPT—improving access to psychological therapies—services never receive treatment. What is his plan to ensure that everyone who needs IAPT services next year gets them?

Finally, on the wider social determinants of ill health, the shameful reality is that people in poorer areas die earlier and get sick quicker. Life expectancy has begun to stall, and has actually gone backwards in some of the poorest parts of the country. Rates of premature mortality are twice as high in the most deprived areas of England compared with the most affluent, and mortality rates for the very sickest of babies are increasing. As laudable as many of the aims that the Secretary of State has announced today are, this document does not even mention poverty or deprivation. It does not even recognise that some of the deepest cuts to public health grants have been in the areas of highest need and highest deprivation.

Yes, we welcome a focus on prevention—we have long called for such a focus—but a genuine commitment to prevention would go hand in hand with a genuine commitment to ending austerity. That must start with reversing the public health cuts and blocking the £1 billion of further cuts to health services to come next year. On that test, the Secretary of State has failed today.

Matt Hancock: Great, well I take that as a broadly positive response from the hon. Gentleman, and I will address the points he makes. He asked about money, and we are putting £20.5 billion extra into the NHS—this is the largest and longest financial commitment any Government have made to any public service ever. Of course, as well as the NHS budget, local authorities have budgets for public health; as he said, that will be addressed in the spending review. The increase in funding must ensure that we do more on prevention, which means more going into community services and into primary care, as well as making sure we get the appropriate level of spending into public health.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the consultation on advertising as part of the obesity plan. As he knows, that will be published before Christmas. He also asked about rates of immunisation. I want to see immunisation used right across the country. There is a campaign all of us can take part in to persuade people and ensure that immunisation takes place. We do not have compulsory immunisation in this country. I believe that is right, on civil liberties grounds, but by goodness it means it is incumbent on all of us to persuade everybody of the health benefits of immunisation.

The hon. Gentleman asked about GP numbers. We want 5,000 more GPs, and I am glad to report that we have got record numbers of GPs in training, thanks to action by this Government. Finally, he asked about the economic causes of ill health. The No. 1 economic cause of ill health is not having a job, and there are record numbers of jobs in this country. If he says that inequality has an impact on ill health, he should probably welcome the fall in inequality that we have seen under this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for what he has just said. A lot of Members wish to take part in this exchange, but I remind the House that there are two debates to follow. The Government have chosen to put on two ministerial statements, which is entirely their prerogative. Naturally, people do then tend to
stand to ask questions, as that is what we do here, but I have also to protect the subsequent business. I therefore politely say to colleagues: if you have a long question in mind, cut it or do not bother. That would be really helpful. Let us start with the Chair of the Select Committee, Dr Sarah Wollaston.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In the Secretary of State’s vision for prevention he rightly points out that £14 of social benefit accrues from every £1 spent in public health. Therefore it is going to be much more challenging for him to deliver on his objectives if there is a further transfer from the public health budgets into NHS England budgets. However, I recognise that this requires action across all Departments, so will he set out what he is going to do to encourage cross-government action on physical activity, because we all know that that is a vital part of public health and prevention?

Matt Hancock: I agree with my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee on that. Of course, the public health budgets for local authorities and Public Health England will be settled as part of the spending review, and there was no change to them in the Budget last week. There are also much wider responsibilities on activity—on cycling and walking—on which I am working with the Department for Transport. The document is all about the cross-government action, and the NHS will come forward with its long-term plan for the NHS-specific action.

If there are aspects of cross-departmental working that she suggests we have not yet taken up, I will be looking forward to listening to her on that.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and, in particular, I welcome his determination to reduce the inappropriate and sometimes disgraceful treatment of vulnerable people with autism and learning disabilities. He says that prevention is infinitely better than cure—nobody is going to disagree with that—and that the Government are encouraging people to make better choices, which is fine. However, that will ring hollow if the Government themselves duck difficult decisions that could help citizens to make better choices; we have heard about the example of junk food advertising already, but let me touch on the issue of alcohol. If he is serious about supporting healthy choices, surely he must bring to an end the free-for-all that sees supermarkets encouraging alcohol consumption by selling it at ludicrously discounted prices. Some estimate that in the first five years a 50p minimum unit price in England could save more than 1,000 lives, reduce hospital admissions by 75,000 and cut healthcare costs by £326 million. If the Secretary of State is serious about prevention, will he support minimum pricing?

Finally, I welcome the moves in respect of the prescription of medicinal cannabis, but too few are benefiting. My constituent Caroline was given months to live after being diagnosed with a brain tumour. Those treating her link her ongoing good standard of living with her use of cannabis oil from Canada, which comes at an enormous financial cost to her and her family. However, those treating her will not prescribe cannabis oil because there is no suitable medical research on which to base such a prescription. Why not let Caroline become part of that research by prescribing medicinal cannabis to her? We can then all learn from her experience.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We have cut salt dramatically and the Secretary of State now wants to cut it further; life will certainly seem longer, will it not?

Matt Hancock: I welcome the moves in respect of the prescription of medicinal cannabis, but too few are benefiting. My constituent Caroline was given months to live after being diagnosed with a brain tumour. Those treating her link her ongoing good standard of living with her use of cannabis oil from Canada, which comes at an enormous financial cost to her and her family. However, those treating her will not prescribe cannabis oil because there is no suitable medical research on which to base such a prescription. Why not let Caroline become part of that research by prescribing medicinal cannabis to her? We can then all learn from her experience.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is astonishing that there was no mention in the statement of poverty as a cause of ill health. Is the Secretary of State really so out of touch with communities in this country that he does not see how austerity is making people ill?

Matt Hancock: The statement talks all about the wider determinants of health. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to talk about poverty specifically, it is absolute poverty, not relative poverty, that has a link to ill health, and that has fallen.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that experts have warned that a million patients are getting useless drugs and injections for back pain, but his Department makes very little use of statutorily regulated osteopaths and chiropractors? Is he also aware that there is a Faculty of Homeopathy here and that the doctors are not employed enough, despite the fact that there are a quarter of a million homeopathic doctors in India?

Matt Hancock: I respect my hon. Friend’s understanding of these issues, not least because I am married to an osteopath, so my back is feeling okay and I hope that other people can access such services, too.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome what the Secretary of State said about people on the autism and special educational needs spectrum. I also welcome his enthusiasm for the use of new technology, big data, data analytics and all that. Across party lines many of us see some real opportunities for delivering real public education in the health sector. When the Secretary of State makes good decisions and puts in the resources, he will have our support.
Matt Hancock: I am grateful for that. We put significant resources into the NHS last Monday. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the use of data. Instead of just targeting the average, it is about making sure that we get the public health messages to the people who really need to hear them. There is an argument that just broadly targeting public health messages actually exacerbates health inequalities, because people who are likely to listen to the messages tend to be people who are more likely to take responsibility for their own health in the first place. We need to be much more targeted and work is under way to make that happen.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State's statement today. It is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do for the NHS, and also a healthy economy needs healthy people. Communities such as my own have very many young people, who are often renting, do not necessarily stay very long and therefore do not register with a GP. Will he take that into account when he is looking at where investment in primary care flows to in the detailed strategy?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The way that money for primary care is allocated is being looked at right now, taking that and other things into account.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): To really make a difference to keep our nation well, prevention has to be the preserve of both local and central Government. I note that the conclusion of the Secretary of State's report says that he will be considering what a health-in-all-policies approach to policymaking could look like next year. Will he signal his support for the health-in-all-policies principle by supporting the Second Reading of my Health Impacts (Public Sector Duty) Bill on Friday 23 November?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady makes a great plea, which I will look into in some detail.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): We have a duty of care to support all our citizens to maintain good health by empowering employers in the private and the public sectors to motivate staff to invest time and commitment into their diet, fitness, and long-term health. How will the Secretary of State create that new ethos?

Matt Hancock: There is such an important role here for employers. It is not part of the culture of the UK, except in some excellent examples, that employers take a proactive view of the health of their employees. Other countries around Europe do that much, much more systematically. I am attracted to the Dutch model, but there are others, too, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support in doing that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Breastfeeding has a significant preventive effect, and babies who are not breastfed are at greater risk of eczema, asthma, obesity, diabetes and sudden infant death syndrome, among other conditions. Scotland has invested in breastfeeding support and seen rates at six to eight weeks rise, whereas in England the rates have fallen for the second year running. Will the Secretary of State invest to bring all maternity and community services up to UNICEF's baby-friendly standard, and will he act to make sure that women who wish to breastfeed are not being failed by the cuts in England?

Matt Hancock: The earlier that we can start with this sort of strategy of preventing ill health the better, and there is a lot of merit in a lot of what the hon. Lady said.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much welcome the statement today. I also welcome the Government's commitment to the daily mile in primary schools—I am a particular fan of it because it was invented by a Scottish headteacher in Stirlingshire. Does the Secretary of State agree that young people being fit and active is good for their mental, social and physical wellbeing?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. I strongly support the daily mile and I try to do it myself. The key is that this is about activity. It is not necessarily about competitive sport, but about healthy activity that can help to prevent all manner of ills.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's focus on learning disability and autism. He will have seen the report in The Times today, which highlights the outrageous profiteering of a number of people in providing the wrong model of care—long-term institutional care—which frequently breaches people's human rights. Will he commit to bringing an end to this profiteering and will he also look at including the endemic use of force—restraint—in these facilities along with seclusion in the Care Quality Commission's investigation?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will. I pay tribute to the work that the right hon. Gentleman did in the Department and the fact that he continues to champion this issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Chair will be keen to move on to the main business at 6 o'clock, or very close thereto, so if people have questions in mind, will they think about how they can shave them?

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Will he outline what his views are for community pharmacy as part of the strategy of prevention?

Matt Hancock: Community pharmacies have a hugely important role to play in keeping people out of hospital and in supporting GP surgeries by doing more. Here, it is the French model that I look to for inspiration, but we should look all across the world to improve our health service.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Tooth decay is entirely preventable, so will the Secretary of State act now to address the concerns of the British Dental Association and others that the new dental contract will not go far enough in prioritising prevention?

Matt Hancock: We are trialling the new contract to get it right. We want to get it right, and I look forward to listening to the hon. Lady's concerns in more detail.
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, I am a very part-time dentist and I am also a supporter of the British Fluoridation Society. Probably the very biggest reason for children attending hospital for general anaesthetic is to extract decayed, rotten, abscessing teeth caused by dental caries. Fluoridation of the water supplies is a very effective means of prevention. Does he support fluoridation of the water supplies, and what can he do to actively promote it, because, at the moment, it is in only 10% of our supplies?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is of course a dentist, and I would love to listen to him speak in more detail about what we can do to get this right.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): If the Secretary of State does not think that poverty and deprivation are key factors in health inequality, can he explain why life expectancy for women in Sheffield has fallen by four years since 2009?

Matt Hancock: I said the opposite actually. There are environmental and economic factors, and they are very important. My point was that having a record level of jobs in this country is a benefit.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): In my constituency of Mid Derbyshire, there is an amazing group of community pharmacies that are saving people going into hospital and getting them out quicker. I invite my right hon. Friend to come and see them. He does not need to go to France; he can come to Mid Derbyshire instead.

Matt Hancock: I will actually be in Derbyshire later this month visiting a neighbouring constituency, but it looks like I have just put another stop on the itinerary.

Mr Speaker: I am quite certain that the Secretary of State has a record level of jobs in this country.

Lady’s constituency.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the focus on prevention. Of course, the next best thing is early diagnosis. Will the Secretary of State look again and remove the arbitrary age limit of 25 for women’s smear tests?

Matt Hancock: We are reviewing questions around that issue, because we want to ensure the best possible prevention and early diagnosis.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the focus on physical activity in the new prevention strategy. First, how will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on this? Secondly, would not not travelling to work provide a great opportunity? Activities such as walking, cycling, tennis before work, Mr Speaker, and my eight minutes of pilates are all cheap or free. What does the Secretary of State have to say about that?

Matt Hancock: Well, I wish I had time for eight minutes of pilates with my hon. Friend. I cannot think of a better way to start the day. I am delighted that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was here for the statement. We have been working with his Department on the strategy because it is so important to work across Government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There is lots that we can agree on in this strategy but, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, I am genuinely disappointed to see that there is no mention of sexual health, HIV or crucial preventive measures such as PrEP. We have made huge progress in reducing new HIV infections in this country. Surely, we cannot risk the reversal of that progress now. Local services have been cut and the Health Foundation estimates that sexual health services in England will have been cut by a quarter by 2020. That means huge consequences for the individual and costs for the NHS. What is the Secretary of State going to do?

Matt Hancock: Public Health England is trialling PrEP, and I am willing to work with the hon. Gentleman and others to ensure that we do everything we can in this space. The truth is that outcomes are improving in many areas of sexual health, and we have to ensure that we get the right treatment to the right people at the right time.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State’s focus on clean air and reducing childhood obesity is massively welcome. In the Netherlands, half of all children cycle to school. In the UK, it is 3%. What more will he do across Government to up that figure?

Matt Hancock: I am working with the Department for Transport. Transport Ministers feel very strongly about this question. The document details some of the things that we are going to do, but I am sure that there are a lot more.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): May I suggest that the Secretary of State has a look at the report, “Fair Society, Health Lives”, by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, particularly at his recommendation about a minimum income for healthy living? With this in mind, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of universal credit and cuts to that scheme on poverty and healthy life expectancy?

Matt Hancock: I have of course looked at that report. It is important, and it is important that we get the answers to it right.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree that more education should be spent on understanding the total role of sugars in combating diabetes, to go with the success that he has had with diabetes, to go with the success that he has had with PrEP? What more will he do across Government to up that figure?

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State’s focus on clean air and reducing childhood obesity is massively welcome. In the Netherlands, half of all children cycle to school. In the UK, it is 3%. What more will he do across Government to up that figure?

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Matt Hancock: I have of course looked at that report. It is important, and it is important that we get the answers to it right.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree that more education should be spent on understanding the total role of sugars in combating diabetes, to go with the success that he has had with regards to the direct focus on sugars in drinks and food?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I strongly agree. Reformulation is critical. However, it is crucial to look not just at sugar, but at calorie count. Replacing sugars with higher calorie products is not necessarily the right way forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Current average waiting times for adult sufferers from eating disorders are 27 weeks, during which time the condition can become much worse. Will the prevention strategy look into concrete proposals to reduce waiting times, with, specifically, targets for waiting times for adult sufferers from eating disorders?
Matt Hancock: Yes, we are considering this as part of the long-term plan. We have already announced that more than £2 billion extra will be going into mental health services and services to tackle eating disorders, and there will be more to come on this very shortly.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Whitestone surgery and its patient participation group, who have brought forward a social prescribing model that has reduced the prevalence of early-onset dementia and reduced the number of anti-depressant drugs being prescribed at that surgery?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I absolutely will. I am a huge fan of social prescribing. I essentially think that because drugs companies have a big budget to try to market their drugs—and of course many drugs do wonders—there is not the equivalent level of organisation to drive up the use of social prescribing. Examples like the one that my hon. Friends mentions are incredibly important.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The half-a-million-pound cut in public health in York has had very serious consequences, while nationally, with regard to the Government’s flagship project of health visiting—the crucial profession in improving outcomes—the number of health visitors has plummeted by 23% from the previous figure of 10,309. Why?

Matt Hancock: We are increasing the budget in future and making sure that we target it more on community services and making sure that we get more prevention rather than cure. I can look at the case of York: I can look right across the country at what we need to do. Making sure that we get better prevention is all part of that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Children’s dental health is shocking and child obesity levels are too high. Will the two words, “parental responsibility”, appear in the Secretary of State’s forthcoming Green Paper?

Matt Hancock: They will now. I believe very strongly in parental responsibility as well as personal responsibility and the responsibilities of employers. We all have a part to play. As parents, we have a very big responsibility to bring up our children in a healthy way, too.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may be aware, one of the benefits of turning 40 is that we become entitled to an NHS MOT every five years. Has he, as part of his very welcome shift towards prevention, considered extending both the age range and frequency of these very important tests?

Matt Hancock: Well, you learn new things every day, Madam Deputy Speaker—as someone who only just turned 40, I had no idea. I think we should send everybody a 40th birthday card from the NHS saying, “You can now have these MOTs every five years.” [Interruption.] The shadow Secretary of State would like one, too. We will make sure that that is arranged right away.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As it is my 40th birthday next month, I will look forward to getting a card. The Croft Hall medical practice in Torquay has taken a bold step to use what was once just a derelict backyard as a community garden as part of its wellbeing hub. What role does my right hon. Friend see that type of work by local GP surgeries playing in this strategy?

Matt Hancock: That sort of work is absolutely brilliant. At one level, it is common sense, but it also needs to be a bigger part of the system. I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this to the House’s attention. Perhaps he should be the first recipient of one of the NHS’s 40th birthday cards.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Are there any other international models inspiring the Secretary of State—in relation to prevention, of course?

Matt Hancock: Yes. [Laughter.]

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The Secretary of State is obviously too young for it, but will he endorse the mile walk aimed at the over-50s that leaves the Stan Ball centre in my constituency at half-past 10 every Monday morning?

Matt Hancock: The daily mile—or, in this case, the mile walk once a week—is not just for children but for all of us who can make it. The example that my hon. Friend mentions is valuable to the community, and I am absolutely delighted that it is happening.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I have a couple of years to go until I am 40, but one in four of my constituents is over 65. Lincolnshire has done great work on frailty and assessing the whole person. Does the Secretary of State agree that actually we need to look at the whole person in the round, and that, for older people, technology can also pay a huge role?

Matt Hancock: Perhaps by the time my hon. Friend becomes 40 it will be a birthday text rather than a birthday card, thus saving on postage costs within the NHS and moving on from the fax machines of old. In all seriousness, the point that he raises is incredibly important. The role of technology in this whole agenda is transforming what we can achieve for the over-65s and for the whole population, as in every other area of life. I know that he is a huge champion of technology, and I would like to think that I am, too. We have yet more to learn about what more we can do to improve people’s lives through technology within the prevention agenda.
Points of Order

5.55 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The treatment of autistic people and people with learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units is nothing short of a national scandal. Seven years after the Winterbourne View scandal, the Government still have not got rid of these units or substantially cut their use. Now we get, with no notice, the whole issue rolled into another oral statement on public health. The shameful treatment of 2,300 people in Bedlam-like conditions is too important to be dealt with in this way. Can you advise on how to get the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to take this issue more seriously in the way that he communicates to the House?

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have come to the House at the first available opportunity to explain very clearly, and with some force, I hope, how strongly I feel about people with learning difficulties and autism being held in seclusion units. It is unacceptable morally and unacceptable medically. It has to stop, and it is going to stop.

Barbara Keeley: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. What I was complaining about was that this was done with no notice—no notice to the shadow Secretary of State, no notice to me or the team, and no notice to Members of this House who were not here to ask questions. We should have had notice that this important issue was being dealt with.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady and the Secretary of State for their points of order. Obviously, the Secretary of State will have heard the point that the hon. Lady has made. I am sure that she will wish to pursue this further. The Secretary of State and the Leader of the House are here on the Treasury Bench, so I am sure that if there is further information forthcoming, that will be the way to proceed.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance as I am a relatively new Member of this House. It came to my attention on Friday that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was visiting my constituency at the weekend. I did not receive advance notice of his visit. I understand that the purpose of the visit was to hold a rally to do a number of things, but particularly to try to get rid of the Scottish Conservatives. Reassuringly, only a handful of people attended the event. I have given the hon. Gentleman notice of this point of order. Am I correct in thinking that it was appropriate for him to give me advance notice of visiting my constituency?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. I am glad that he has confirmed that he also warned the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that he was going to raise the point of order. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that there is a well-established convention that if Members plan to visit other Members’ constituencies for political—not for personal—reasons, they should give them advance notice. It is important that we maintain this courtesy to one another.

BILL PRESENTED

School Uniforms Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field, supported by Tim Loughton, presented a Bill to require school governing bodies to implement affordability policies when setting school uniform requirements; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November and to be printed (Bill 283).
Bullying and Harassment: Cox Report

5.59 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Dame Laura Cox report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff.

Most people who work here in Parliament fully realise what a privilege it is to do so and that whether we are MPs, peers or senior management of the House, we should all carry out our work to the highest possible standards, both professionally and morally. We should behave in the way set out for us by the Nolan principles, and we should lead by example. Most of us fully accept that when we fall short of the high standards rightfully expected of us, we should be held accountable for our actions and that, as part of playing a role in public life, we should also challenge poor standards and poor behaviour when we see them.

As I said in response to the urgent question on 16 October, I welcome Dame Laura Cox’s report, “The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff”, and I would like to thank her for her important work. As her hard-hitting report recognises, the House of Commons has fallen woefully short in supporting and protecting its staff. It has failed the people who work here. The fact that some of those in positions of power or authority have bullied, intimidated and harassed those who work alongside them and perpetuated a culture where that behaviour is not only tolerated but comes to be expected by members of staff as “the norm” is outrageous. There is no place for abuse or harassment in Parliament. That applies to everyone, without exception.

Today’s debate is undoubtedly an important one, but it must form part of a bigger picture. We need to continue to hear the views of every person who works in or for Parliament, especially those who have struck up the courage to speak out about the unacceptable behaviour that they know must be challenged. It is to those people that I especially want to speak directly today. Thank you for your courage in speaking out. I know how difficult the decision to do so will have been, and I am absolutely determined to make your working lives and the working lives of everyone in this place as fulfilling and as dignified as they unquestionably should be. I am so sorry to hear of your experiences. You should never have been treated unjustly.

This is an amazing place to work in many different ways—something that the report brings out—but Dame Laura’s report also shows a dark side and makes clear that we must not rest until all people working here are treated with dignity and respect. I give my personal commitment to the House that I will not stop until that is the case. Anything that falls short of that goal is not acceptable.

Today, we are debating this important report, how its recommendations will be taken forward and what more we can do. Before we turn to that in earnest, I want to outline briefly the action that has been taken so far to change Parliament for the better—and make no mistake, we are taking action. As Members are aware, the Prime Minister convened a working group a year ago to establish a new independent complaints and grievance procedure for Parliament. A first-rate programme team made up of senior House staff, for whose work I am very grateful, took forward the implementation of the working group’s recommendations. That was overseen by a cross-party steering group made up of representatives from all parties, trade unions and staff.

A new Parliament-wide independent grievance scheme was launched by a vote of the House in July. The scheme, now known as the ICGS, has a number of key features. First, the House has agreed a shared behaviour code that applies to everyone in the House, with no exceptions, and holds all of us here, unequivocally, to the same high standards of behaviour.

Secondly, there are two new independent helplines and investigative services, with corresponding policies in place—one to deal with bullying and harassment, and a separate one to deal with sexual misconduct. Those policies underpin the behaviour code and ensure that everyone in this House now has access to an independent scheme that will handle their complaint or grievance. The number for those helplines can be found on the parliamentary intranet.

Thirdly, it was very important to ensure that Members’ staff had access to independent human resources support, which has never until this point been available, so a human resources support service has now been established for Members’ staff. Lastly, there is a significant programme of work under way to develop better training, both mandatory and optional, to equip all those who work in this place to manage staff appropriately and promote the culture change we all want to see.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is an important report. I have three daughters and four granddaughters, and we want people to be treated the way that members of our family would be treated. It is all very well calling for a change in culture, but we need good management to deliver that. I welcome most of the report, but that was one of the disappointing bits. What management steps are being taken to ensure that this works positively for anyone who is at risk?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about changing the management of the House and not just the processes. I will come on to that, if he will bear with me, but I want to first finish talking about what is currently available, because it is incredibly important for all those who want to come forward with a complaint.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The point raised by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is a very salient one. We spend an awful lot of time looking at processes and procedures, writing down codes and adjusting rules, and very little time thinking about how we change the culture. It is not about the management of this place; it is about every single right hon. and hon. Member in this House. We lead this place, and we set the example and the tone. The question is how we want the governance of this place to change the culture, and that falls on us, not on some obscure committee elsewhere to take that responsibility away from us.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I will come on to governance issues, but I would like to finish talking about the processes that we have put in place since July this summer.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Dame Laura Cox refers in her report to the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service helping staff who have been subject to bullying and harassment, and she comments that the service is “overworked, under resourced, under promoted and undervalued by the senior administration.”

Will my right hon. Friend meet Dr Madan, who heads up the service as the leading occupational physician? She has a unique insight into the culture and sees staff who might not feel confident to come forward.

Andrea Leadsom: I would be delighted to meet the head of the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the service has been overworked. As part of the new complaints and grievance procedure, resources will be made available, but nevertheless I would be very happy to meet the lady she mentions.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I bring the House’s attention to paragraph 418 of Dame Laura’s report, which says:

“In relation to allegations made against Members of Parliament, it is readily acknowledged and should be emphasised that the overwhelming majority of Members behave entirely appropriately and courteously towards members of House staff. However, their collective reputation is being damaged by the allegations of unacceptable behaviour made against some of their number and by the inadequacy of the procedures in place to deal with complaints. I have no doubt that they will regard this as intolerable.”

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a relatively small number of rotten apples, but the problem with our particular barrel is that those rotten apples are quite near the top?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, my hon. Friend makes a really important point. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, most of us here absolutely accept that we need to behave with the greatest of professionalism and moral authority. It is only a few who let us down, but nevertheless, when they do so, they have to be called out, counted and dealt with appropriately.

I would like to return to discussing the independent complaints and grievance procedure, which is known as the ICGS. I can report to the House that, from the launch of the ICGS in July to the end of September, a total of 51 calls were made with complaints and concerns, and a small number of investigations into complaints are currently under way. Initial indications for October show that the call rate is continuing at the same level. I can tell the House that we intend to publish the reporting data quarterly.

Vitally, the ICGS is confidential, which encourages complainants to come forward without any fear of publicity or retribution. The investigation process is also completely independent. Where the finding against any individual is so severe as to require consideration of terminating their employment, there is a clear route in all circumstances. Specifically in the case of MPs who are accused of wrongdoing, that route is currently to the Committee on Standards, which has taken steps to allow the seven lay members to have a vote in addition to the seven elected members. This is an important step. I am aware that some want to see further independence from Members themselves, and the House of Commons Commission and the Standards Committee will look at how this can be achieved while still upholding the principles of democratic accountability. To be absolutely clear: we are fully committed to ensuring that the accountability of MPs is enforced.

As I have said, ever since taking on the chairmanship of the working group, establishing the complaints procedure has been the first, and not the last, step towards the culture change we all want to see. There are three crucial next steps that we agreed earlier in the year. First, there should be an independent inquiry into allegations of bullying of House staff, and it is this report that we are debating today. Secondly, there should also be an independent review of historical allegations of Members and their staff, which I understand is to be publicly launched tomorrow. I do urge all those who have experienced bullying and harassment in any way to come forward to give evidence to that inquiry. Thirdly, there will be a review of the ICGS after six months of operation, and again after 18 months. I will be meeting with the ICGS steering group shortly to consult further on how we take forward that first review.

Mr Sheerman: On an important factual point, the right hon. Lady may remember that I chaired the anti-bullying group in Parliament, a cross-party group that was very much supported by the Speaker. Some of its members are no longer Members, but will they be eligible to give evidence? Having such a parliamentary group was a very important turning point psychologically. We were accepted as having a contribution to make, and we started to look at the behaviour of Members of Parliament. Some of us knew about their behaviour, but could not actually drag it out into the daylight.

Andrea Leadsom: I would certainly be very happy to discuss how the hon. Gentleman and colleagues can feed into the review. As he will be aware, the ICGS steering group is made up of Members of this House and of the other place, as well as trade union members and members of staff of MPs and peers. Nevertheless, it will be for a wide variety of stakeholders to feed into that process, and I would be delighted to discuss that with him.

Turning now to Dame Laura’s report, its findings are shocking. As I said on 16 October, it was important that the House leadership responded promptly and comprehensively. The House of Commons Commission has met twice since then and has agreed in full Dame Laura’s three key recommendations. The commission has further directed the Commons Executive Board to produce a speedy action plan in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, which will be taken forward with the help and support of the external members of the Commission.

I would now like to turn to each of Dame Laura’s key recommendations. First, she recommends that the Valuing Others and Respect policies, which were available to House staff, are discarded. House staff have been able to access the ICGS since it began in July, so the House of Commons Commission has agreed that the pre-existing policies should be discarded.

Secondly, Dame Laura recommends that the new ICGS is amended to ensure that those House employees with complaints involving historical allegations can access the new scheme. I think it is important to clarify that House staff already do have the same rights of access to
the ICGS as everyone else here. The steering group agreed that historical allegations would be accepted by the new scheme. However, legal advice taken advised that allegations referring to events that predate the 2017 Parliament could be considered only under any sanctions available at the time of the offence. Dame Laura’s report suggests that the House of Commons Commission look at this again. It has agreed to do so, and that will be taken forward.

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** The Leader of the House mentions the important fact that if anybody has allegations, those allegations will be judged against what was right at that time. However, surely it was always wrong to harass and bully people in this place. That is the standard against which we should treat everybody.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend is exactly right. That is a very helpful clarification because there has been some misunderstanding. Anybody with a historical allegation that predates July 2017 can and should come forward under the complaints and grievance procedure. The difference is that the behaviour code itself cannot be applied pre-July 2017. However, as my right hon. Friend points out, exactly correctly, most of the sorts of behaviours that people will expect to come forward to complain about would already have been captured under a pre-existing code of some sort—either the code of conduct for MPs or, indeed, employment contracts. I do encourage anybody with any complaint to come forward under the complaints procedure and not be put off by the fact that the behaviour code itself—this new creation of the House—applies only from July 2017. This is an incredibly important point, because there has been some misunderstanding about it. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for clarifying that point.

**Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** On the scope of the scheme, will my right hon. Friend confirm, as many of us spend a lot of time in our constituencies, that it also includes our constituency staff and offices?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes. Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for another point of clarification. The scheme absolutely includes everybody who works for or with Parliament, including members of staff in our constituency offices, pass holders and indeed those who work on a voluntary basis, provided they are actually employed here. There are some limitations, but it also applies to visitors to this place. It is all-ensompassing—it covers all those who come here or work for Members of Parliament.

Dame Laura’s third recommendation is that complaints brought by House staff against Members of Parliament should be subject to an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part whatsoever. I can tell hon. Members that, before establishing the ICGS, there were several productive meetings with the Committee on Standards. The then Chairman, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), recognised the need for lay members to have a majority vote on sanctions against MPs and took steps to ensure that this would be the case. I have recently met the new Chair of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who is in her place. I know she has further suggestions on how to ensure greater independence of the process, so I look forward to hearing the hon. Lady’s contribution today.

Dame Laura’s key recommendations are clear and have been agreed by the House of Commons Commission. What is less clear, however—but this is definitely the most important part of today’s debate, as some hon. Members have already said—is how we can change the culture of Parliament that has made these recommendations necessary. The failings are institutional: they are systemic, they have become embedded and, as noted by Dame Laura, they cascade “from the top down”. It is my strong view that we need to look at the governance of the House of Commons, and we need to democratise it to ensure that with authority comes full accountability.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** The truth of the matter is that it is down to leadership. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin): we are talking about leadership, and all the rules count for nothing if our style is wrong. We know what is right, and people who do wrong should be called out by the rest of us and dealt with. We do not need commissions or rules for that. What is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. We should know that as MPs.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is right: it is about leadership. The complaints procedure is vital to give satisfaction, justice and clarity to those who have suffered at the hands of any Member or, indeed, any member of staff, but my hon. Friend is right that leadership is key.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)** rose—

**Andrea Leadsom:** I would like to make one point—I think the hon. Gentleman will be interested to hear it—before I give way.

We need to democratise the House of Commons, but governance change cannot and should not happen overnight. The then Public Administration Committee, chaired, as the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is now, by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), said in written evidence to the House of Commons Governance Committee, which held the last review of House of Commons governance in 2014:

“Any structural or organisational change should only be considered as a consequence of a full understanding of the underlying causes of difficulty or failure. If this is not done, structural change, with all the disruption which that involves, will become no more than a distraction. This may be welcomed by those who want to avoid the more difficult, personal causes of problems in the organisation, which are likely to be in the culture. By culture, we mean what is embedded in the attitudes and behaviour of the people in the organisation, and PASC has found this is by far the most important determinant of organisational effectiveness.”

That still rings true—structural change needs to be considered in the context of an organisation’s culture.

**Chris Bryant:** I completely agree with the point that the right hon. Lady just made.

Leadership comes in many different styles. There are autocratic styles of leadership: when I was on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee many years ago, our Committee was run in that way and it was inappropriate. Now most Select Committees are much more likely to work as a team. I wonder whether the House of Commons...
Commission would be better if it were constituted more like a Select Committee that worked as a team of people, throughout a Parliament, with each individual in the team able to assume responsibility. That might be a better way of leading change within the House.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and I am keen to hear all Members’ views on how we can improve the democracy in this place.

Dame Laura’s report has made it clear that we need to consider first, changing the power balance in this place; secondly, giving staff a stronger voice; and thirdly, addressing how to stop failures at the top infecting our entire workplace. Therefore, one of the questions I would like the House to consider and give views on today is whether the current structure of the House of Commons leadership is fit for purpose.

The Commission has tasked the Commons Executive Board with bringing forward a speedy action plan, and I support that. My vision for a future democratisation of governance is a leadership structure that is fully and fairly representative of all who work here, and accountable for all actions and decisions. Any changes to governance need to be carefully considered, and they need to be fit for a 21st-century Parliament. My three personal tests for considering future proposals for change in the House’s leadership are, first, will they mean that everyone who works here can expect to be treated with dignity and respect? Secondly, will they rebuild the confidence of those who have suffered in the past? Thirdly, do all those who work here feel they have a proper stake in the decisions that affect them?

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): My perception is that if we are to democratise the House, whatever system we use must be simple, not bureaucratic.

We have a tendency in the House when we look at new ideas and introduce new institutions to get very bureaucratic. Any new structure must be a simple one that everybody understands, not top-down and overburdened with people at the top.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I completely agree and I will be interested to hear whether the hon. Gentleman has further thoughts on any changes he would like to propose.

In opening today’s debate about Dame Laura’s report, I welcome not only her specific recommendations for urgent change, but her broader conclusions about accountability and leadership in this place. I look forward to hearing views from all colleagues.

6.25 pm

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for opening the debate. I hope that she will join me in sending good wishes to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is not very well. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) who is taking his place.

Once again, I, too, thank Dame Laura Cox QC OBE for her diligence in carrying out this inquiry. As the Leader of the House said, the report is important. The Opposition accept the recommendations in full, immediately. It is vital that victims of abuse have their voices heard and that we get it right now.

**Andrew Bridgen:** Does the shadow Leader of the House agree that the crux of the problem is that, until we have a culture in this place whereby a member of staff who makes a complaint about a senior manager or a Member is confident that they are not ending their career, nothing will happen?

**Valerie Vaz:** The Leader of the House has set out the new process, so people should feel confident.

The Opposition are grateful to all those who contributed to the report. I say to those members of staff: I acknowledge the hurt that you have suffered and the courage of those who have spoken up. Those who work in the canteens and throughout the House, you undertake your work professionally and with integrity. You are helpful, creative, and supportive of Members. There is a very high standard of work here, which is appreciated. This place simply would not function without you.

I hope that the debate will do justice to the responses and the work that was put into the report, and I will highlight just a few areas. The report notes that a cultural change needs to happen. In paragraph 67, Dame Laura Cox says that:

“structural and governance arrangements have changed several times over the years, while the organisational culture has remained firmly in place.”

I know that the Leader of the House agrees that a cultural change is needed and has previously said in the House that it will “not happen overnight”. However, will she update the House on how a cultural change will be measured so we know we are making progress?

Dame Laura Cox highlighted the gender and racist dimension to bullying and harassment. Paragraph 123 states that,

“some areas of the House were described as having a particularly bad reputation for sexist or racist attitudes”.

Of the 200 people who came forward to give information to the inquiry, the majority, nearly 70%, were women. The House of Commons and Parliamentary Digital Service diversity and inclusion strategy 2019 to 2022 is evidence of the House service’s commitment to ensuring that this place is a positive and inclusive environment to work in. Jennifer Crook is head of diversity and inclusion, and work is already under way. She has produced a very good report highlighting successes in, for example, talent management, and rolled out unconscious bias training.

According to the recent staff survey, staff with disabilities have the highest rates of experiencing discrimination, bullying and harassment and are less likely to agree that the House service provides an inclusive environment. That is followed by black, Asian and minority ethnic staff, particularly black British staff. The Cox report, taken together with results from the staff survey, which suggested that 18% of staff had experienced bullying or harassment in the past 12 months, most of it at the hands of other staff, and that 3% had experienced sexual harassment, shows we clearly have a long way to go before we can claim we have an inclusive workplace.

Dame Laura Cox raises the need for training. In paragraph 311, she states:

“Even those Members most implacably opposed will gain from it, despite any current intransigence.”
At the urgent question on 16 October, the Leader of the House said:

“available is a wide range of optional, voluntary training in how to carry out appraisals, how to lead an office and so on.”

She went on to say:

“Compulsory training for new Members will be introduced after the next election. It was decided that there was no consensus in favour of compulsory training for those who were already Members.”—[Official Report, 16 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 541-2.]

In my view, if we want cultural change everyone should have training and it should be compulsory. Will the Leader of the House please reconsider, in the light of the Cox report, that compulsory training should be discussed again?

Chris Bryant: My personal suspicion is that if we made training very available so it was easy for Members to attend, the vast majority of Members would sign up to it without us having to get to the compulsory stage. I am up for making it compulsory if we have to do that, but I am sure the vast majority of Members would not be intransigent. Most of us would not even know whether we had been inappropriate because we have not had proper training and we would be delighted to do it, but it needs somebody to get on the phone and persuade us all to turn up.

Valerie Vaz: I think my hon. Friend is saying two slightly different things: that someone has to get on the phone and that Members will do it. We could say to people that training is available and that everyone has to undertake it. For example, people in the civil service have to go through training before they can interview anyone. I think it is perfectly reasonable to say to Members that they should undergo some training.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: This point about training is very contentious. I am afraid that Members of Parliament are not civil servants. It is only recently in the history of the House of Commons that Members of Parliament were considered even to be employed in legal terms. Until the mid ’60s we were self-employed. The idea that we should be treated as civil servants is not right. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is completely right. If training were available and those in leadership positions in this House set the right example, by taking the training themselves and telling junior Members that they are expected to be trained in these matters, training would become part of our culture. It depends on the leadership, not compulsion.

Valerie Vaz: I was not suggesting that this is like the civil service. I was just saying that if you are going through a process you need to be trained in it. I think that some people do not understand what sexism or racism is. They do not understand certain behaviours. If people at the top are expected to do it, everyone should do it. There is not an issue; half a day should be acceptable.

Mrs Miller: May I suggest that the hon. Lady takes a leaf out of the Canadian Government’s book? They put in place training for every Minister within weeks of the #MeToo campaign kicking off. Everybody did it and they actually thought it was a good thing to do.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Lady. I will come on to that later. That is a very good point.

The House of Commons Commission met on Wednesday 24 October 2018 to discuss the report’s recommendations and consider a way forward. The meeting was chaired by Jane McCall, the senior external member of the Commission. The task is falling to Jane McCall and Rima Makarem to oversee the work. Quite rightly, there will be no Member involvement. At this point, I want to thank Dame Janet Gaymer for her involvement and for all her work on the Commission. The Opposition welcome the decision by the Commission to accept the recommendations of the Cox report. The Commission is terminating the Valuing Others policy and has suspended operation of the Respect policy, recommending that the House terminate it as soon as possible.

Dame Laura’s report was critical of the independent complaints and grievance policy. The Commission recommends that the House amends the new independent complaints and grievance scheme to ensure that those House employees with complaints involving historical allegations can access the new scheme. The Commission rightly recommends that the House considers the most effective way to ensure that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament is an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part. The Commission agreed not to wait for the six-month review of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, due to start in January 2019, but to identify a way to give those with historical complaints access to the scheme. Could the Leader provide the House with details on what work is already under way? She said that she will report quarterly. When will we get the first report?

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. I fear she is in danger of perpetuating the mistake that currently people do not have access to the complaints scheme for historical allegations. They absolutely do and I urge anybody with any complaint to come forward to the complaints scheme now—they do have access to it.

Valerie Vaz: I am not perpetuating a myth. I am reporting factually what the Commission decided. That is exactly what the Commission decided: to look at the scheme to ensure that people can do that. The Leader of the House did not answer my question, but maybe she will answer it at the end.

In respect of historical allegations, there should be a fair process. In paragraph 401, Dame Laura Cox suggests that

“Distinguished senior lawyers or retired judges, highly experienced in handling these sensitive cases and in analysing evidence and finding facts, would ensure that the investigations...were treated with respect.”

She also suggests that everyone will have confidence in such a process. Investigators currently in place do not have that experience. Will the Leader of the House ensure that investigators with sufficient experience will handle those cases? In paragraph 379, Dame Laura Cox highlights the general reluctance of Members to judge the misconduct of other Members or even to assist in investigations. She makes reference, as the Leader of the House did, to the Nolan principle of leadership, which
“requires all holders of public office to be willing to challenge misconduct or inappropriate behaviour, wherever it occurs.”

That includes Member on Member, which we should remind ourselves of.

Cox states:

“There is now an institutional responsibility to act to restore public confidence in the central institution of our representative democracy.”

I hope that is respected with the widest consultation on any new process with a broad range of the trade unions that operate in this workplace and other stakeholders, and, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), that the current and new system have sufficient resources. What discussions has the Leader of the House had with the Government to ensure the allocation of proper resources and extra staff to make this work?

There should be time to look at best practice around the world—the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) suggested looking at Canada—and in other public organisations. Democracy is stronger when it is inclusive and reflects all the people it seeks to serve irrespective of age, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, identity, sex, sexuality or socio-economic background.

It is vital that everyone working in a modern Parliament knows the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in a safe and secure workplace, and that we all play a vital role in ensuring that our Parliament and our democracy thrive.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We will start off with a seven-minute limit.

6.38 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I pay tribute to the tenacity and commitment of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I do not think anybody has done more to try to deal with the situation we face. She is absolutely right that being a Member of this place is a privilege. It is like no other job. We represent people with the most extraordinary commitment to this place. They want a safe workplace. The people I have worked with as a Member of Parliament, whether Clerks or anybody else, are an extraordinary bunch of people with the most extraordinary commitment to supporting the work of this place in whatever role they have. I very much welcome Dame Laura Cox’s report and I, too, pay tribute to the 200 or so people who gave evidence. Nobody but nobody today should even attempt to dismiss this report because of that enormous commitment from our members of staff.

Many staff have approached us as Members and welcomed the proposed changes, but there is a toxic lack of trust in management about whether the changes will actually come into effect. I will come on to the point about culture in a moment, but it is important to point out that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, culture is something that we all have ownership of and all shape, but we shape it at a very high level. When it comes to shaping that culture for a working environment, staff are much more likely to see that coming from their direct management, and that direct management culture prevails for the vast majority of members of staff in this place. What has been most revealing about the Cox report is that, although there are of course issues about the behaviour of Members of Parliament, there are also significant issues about the behaviour of members of staff as well, and we should not be shy about discussing that.

Dame Laura Cox’s report talked about a culture of complacency, cover-up and denial that has allowed the abuse and harassment of staff to thrive for so long. I believe that that culture still pervades. We have only to look at the way in which the management here reacted to the “Newsnight” allegations in March: they were immediately dismissed as a “protestive exaggeration”, yet the Cox report categorically exposes the fact that, far from an exaggeration, all those allegations are much more likely to be an accurate depiction of what is going on for too many people in this place. Indeed, the problems run deeper than just the abuse, to the dismissive way in which allegations are handled, and that has created a toxic lack of trust in senior management. Why does this matter? It matters because our staff have a right in law to not suffer discrimination and management have a duty in law to treat people correctly, and make sure that they are treated correctly. However, we also have a duty to make sure that we set the best of examples—indeed, so that we can attract an even more diverse cross-section of MPs to this place.

The current situation risks bringing the House of Commons and, thereby our democracy, into disrepute. The media revelations in the spring were a real wake-up call, but why did it take “Newsnight” to report this and to prompt Dame Laura Cox’s report? According to data given to the Cox inquiry, despite an increasing number of complaints under “Valuing Others”, there had been no findings and external investigations of bullying or harassment for the past four or five years. Why did management systems not pick this up? This is why, while the Leader of the House is right to talk about changes to process, the issue of culture and management is really important, too.

The laws passed in this Chamber are being wilfully ignored by the people tasked with running the House of Commons. The laws that we insist are enforced in the courts are not being enforced in this place. In particular, the House of Commons is subject to the law under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 on the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, as the regulator, is now threatening to take action against the House of Commons. That is a disgraceful situation for us to be in. How can we be in a situation where we are in breach of the laws that we have agreed on the Floor of the House? This is serious.

I very much welcome the clarifications from the Leader of the House on the work that she is doing to make sure that the independent complaints and grievance scheme can address historical allegations and that it will be clear to everybody that it does so; that it has built-in independence; and that things will not be delayed unnecessarily. However, Members cannot allow the Commission to cherry-pick from the Cox report. It has
to be adopted in full if we are to get away from the disgraceful situation of the EHRC potentially intervening on this place.

The Cox report is absolutely clear that new processes are insufficient in their own right to bring about the culture change that we need. The report says:

“The House strategy...risks being thwarted without a change in the culture necessary to deliver it.”

Bullying and harassment continue to be regarded as a distraction from the real work of the House. Cox is absolutely explicit about the need for top officeholders to change—not in her recommendations, because of course, that was outside her terms of reference, but it is integral to the report—yet the Commission is silent on this. Paragraph 414 states:

“I find it difficult to envisage how the necessary changes can be successfully delivered, and the confidence of the staff restored, under the current senior...administration.”

Andrew Bridgen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way to give confidence to future complainants is to ensure now that historical complaints are dealt with effectively and efficiently?

Mrs Miller: I think the Leader of the House has already said that that is the case.

Turning to my concluding remarks, although I see that I did not get an extra minute for the question asked by my hon. Friend—[Interruption.] To quote again from the report,

“there are a number of individuals who are regarded as bearing some personal responsibility for the criticisms made, and whose continued presence is viewed as unlikely to facilitate the necessary changes”.

The report could not be clearer. We have to make sure that there is senior management change in this place before we can make sure that the important process changes come into play. We have to make sure that the Commission is democratically accountable in the way that the Leader of the House has talked about. I believe that we also have to insulate the role of Speaker from dealing with these sorts of organisational issues, which are an immense distraction from his main role, which is to be in here presiding over impartial debate.

In summary, we really need to make sure that nobody here today can dismiss this report; that the debate is focused not just on process, but on making sure that we have the right leadership in place to fix the issues as we move forward; that we tackle the culture that has led to devastating criticism of the management of this place; and importantly, that we focus on how we can build back the trust of staff. That has to be the focus of today’s debate. We need to consider how we can make sure that the root cause of the cultural problems that we face are dealt with systematically not only by every Member of this House, but in the management of this place.

6.46 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House; the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz); and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for their comments on these very serious issues; they have very much set the tone for the debate. I commend Dame Laura Cox for her report and every single person who has contributed to it and felt that they were brave enough to come forward to speak and share their experiences, as traumatic as they no doubt were. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) cannot be here today—he is in his sick bed—but he very much agrees with what has been recommended in the report, and we in the Scottish National party give our backing to its findings as well.

When my hon. Friend last spoke about this topic in this place, he said:

“Historical patriarchy practically oozes out of the walls”—[Official Report, 16 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 534]—of this building, and I absolutely agree. I have no doubt that the ingrained masculine culture in this institution is a key factor in the shocking cases of bullying and harassment that have been brought to the attention of the House. This behaviour has to stop. Those perpetrating such bullying need to be under no doubt that their behaviour is unacceptable.

I question what the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said in an intervention about people knowing, of course, that their behaviour is unacceptable; I am not sure that they do. I think that is part of the problem and why I very much agree that training needs to be put in place, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned, because if we are not aware of the impact of our behaviour, we are not going to change it.

Bob Stewart: I absolutely endorse what the hon. Lady says. She is probably right that the people who are bullies do not even realise that they are bullying. It is tragic, but they do not, and they need that pointed out and to be educated.

Alison Thewliss: Yes, I agree. Some people may be well aware of what they are doing and of the impact of their behaviour, but some may not. It is time that we were brave enough to point that out to them, and I will mention that later.

The report is damning. It has the potential to be very damaging to the public’s trust in the procedures and legitimacy of this place and of us as elected Members—a trust that has already been thoroughly ravaged by the expenses scandal a few years ago. It is vital that we take this report seriously and treat all those who spoke out with the absolute respect that they deserve.

I agree with the Leader of the House that solving this problem is a non-negotiable course of action, and we have to act now before any further damage is done. As well as the horrific personal toll that abuse and harassment take on individuals, there is the wider impact, as this culture has led to the discouragement of women in politics. The gender balance in this Parliament is nowhere near good enough. Although we have a record level of female MPs in 2018, it is still less than a third of the total number elected. Many women I come across say, “Oh, I couldn’t do your job,” and they do so not because it is a fundamentally difficult job—some aspects are—and not always because of the hours or the distance, but because of how they perceive the culture of this place. They see Prime Minister’s questions as men in suits shouting at one another, and they see no place for themselves here as a result.

Dame Laura Cox’s report is particularly enlightening on the broader culture in which this situation has been able to foster. She describes it as
"an excessively hierarchical, ‘command and control’ and deferential culture, which has no place in any organisation in the 21st century.”

This culture is our biggest issue as policy makers. It is no exaggeration to say it has wide-reaching detrimental effects on society. Unfortunately, trickle-down patriarchy has been much more effective than trickle-down economics has ever been.

There is gross over-representation in this place of a certain demographic—namely, upper-class, white men in suits. The report makes reference to certain public schools and Oxbridge universities as having a disproportionate influence. Of course, there are many among this demographic who are dedicated public servants whom I take no issue with and who work tirelessly for their constituents, and it is not my intention to single out any one person or party, but it is irrefutable that over-representation in one area leads to limited understanding of the experience of others.

I have spoken at length in this place about the terrible practice of retro-fitting women into policies. Women are not an afterthought to be tackled on to the decision-making process. That is how we have ended up with welfare reforms that make matters worse for abused women and immigration rules that discriminate, and it is why we have the two-child policy and the despicable rape clause—because these policies were not made to reflect the lived experiences of women.

It is really important to look at ways we can change the misogynistic culture in the House. Many women in my constituency and elsewhere would make fantastic representatives or members of staff, but without serious change they will not put themselves forward in a culture that does not respect their skills and experience. My former colleague Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, when she was elected to this place, was subject to wooing noises in this Chamber. If that is the example being set by Members, it reflects very badly on us all.

The Cox report described the experiences of female staff:

“Some women described always being asked to buy the coffee or make the tea, or take notes of meetings, for example, or being humiliated in front of colleagues by comments about why they needed to work or have a career if they had a husband, or ‘why do we need another woman in here, we already have two.’”

It is clear that the systems in place—the Valuing Others policy and the revised Respect policy—are not fit for purpose and need to be disregarded. We need to move on to something better.

A lot of the focus has been on the behaviour of MPs, but I want to be absolutely clear that this culture has deep roots. A lot of it is built on class hierarchy and misogyny, and bullying would appear to be rife throughout this institution. Those at the bottom of the wage scale in this place are those at most risk. I am deeply concerned about the caterers, the cleaners, the contractors—those people who are not as visible to the public as we are but who as a result are so much easier for the House to ignore. I want to ensure that their voices are heard in all future policies, and I want them to feel they can challenge unacceptable behaviour, regardless of who it comes from.

We need to recognise, too, that our own staff are vulnerable by dint of how they are employed. After all, how does someone challenge their employer directly and deal with something effectively within a very small team of staff? I have heard several times how MPs have treated their staff, and I think we all need to get a good deal braver in calling this out, because it is not good enough—so allows it to continue. We need to stop making excuses for people. On page 141 of the report, Dame Laura highlights how unlikely we are to criticise our fellow MPs—the Leader of the House mentioned this, too, in the context of our procedures. We need to think about how we do this, without fear or favour and without risking our own personal relationships—a lot of us in politics grew up together and have those friendships and relationships.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is making an important point. It is also part of our job to hold to account those managing this place. On behalf of the SNP, does she not find it very concerning that the Commission has not commented on the need for a complete management change here? What does she feel we need to do about that?

Alison Thewliss: The report makes it clear that there has to be change and that we need to look at our policies and procedures and make sure that everything is fit for purpose, and yes the report falls short.

Mrs Miller: The report does not fall short.

Alison Thewliss: Sorry, I mean the response to the report falls short—very short—in a number of aspects. I do not have permission to name names, but I have heard testimony from a former member of staff in this place who was subjected to offensive sexist remarks by a more senior manager, used quite deliberately to undermine her position and confidence. She did not feel she could complain, and she did not want me to raise it further, but I fear that the person who made those comments will have thought little of them and will make them again to other women in his future career. As I say, if we do nothing, this culture grows and festers, and if people do not see their behaviour challenged, they believe that it is acceptable and that they can get away with anything.

Culture change would help participation in politics in the future, but it is of limited consolation to those who have suffered injustice in the past. Ours is often seen as rough-and-tumble profession with long and unforgiving hours and an immense workload, but that does not for one second excuse the unacceptable behaviour described by this inquiry, which is far reaching and fundamental. Discourse can be robust, but the allegations we are hearing about go far beyond what is acceptable during any normal disagreement.

Huge elements of this can be changed, and the Scottish Parliament, while not perfect, set itself up to avoid this kind of culture. From the outset, the Scottish Parliament made clear its commitment to inclusive and family friendly workplace practices, with key principles of accessibility, participation and equal opportunity. As the Leader of the House mentioned, best practice was drawn upon in its planning phase to ensure that the establishment of the new legislature could learn from the mistakes and successes of other legislatures, including this place. There was a firm understanding that Holyrood would not simply be a Westminster in the north.
Promoting a family friendly culture and work environment has been a key priority of the Scottish Parliament, and that is reflected in its sitting hours—finishing at 5 pm, voting being fixed at a set time so that staff and MPs do not have to stay late into the evening, unlike in this place, where sitting hours can vary hugely. We also have in this building a pervasive culture of alcohol—this has been missing somewhat from the debate thus far. We have receptions at lunchtime serving drinks and people encouraged to hang around in bars while we wait for late-night votes, and this breeds a culture where we are not behaving as professionals in this building. We are then forced to spend a ridiculous amount of time in crowded voting lobbies, which is unpleasant and unsafe, particularly when some Members have been drinking for a good part of the day.

A lot of the reporting on this has been done in dramatic tabloid language, and the culture in the past has been to cover it up and pretend that it is all fine, which has led directly to the situation today where we worry too much about the reputation of the House, rather than the people who work within it.

Andrew Bridgen: Is this place not part of the problem? Members of staff have complained to me about the behaviour of other Members. I say, “Make a formal complaint,” and they say, “But I’ll lose my job.” We have to remember that if someone is employed by the House of Commons or the Palace of Westminster and loses their job, it will go on their CV and affect their future employment prospects, and that is why they will not make a complaint.

Alison Thewliss: That is absolutely true, and it is reflected in the report in many ways. For example, people fear that if they were to complain or raise an issue, they would be seen as a troublemaker trying to upset the way things have been done—and from reading the report, it seems to me that the way things have been done absolutely has to be turned around.

Andrea Leadsom: On a point of clarification, the new ICGS is totally confidential. I want people to know that if they proceed with a complaint their name will not be mentioned and they need not fear retribution or publicity.

Alison Thewliss: That is good to hear, although people worry too much about the reputation of the House, which has led directly to the situation today where we are not behaving as professionals in this building. We must ensure that members of staff who wish to complain about bullying and harassment have the necessary access and support, regardless of when the incident occurred and who it involved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest that we lower the speaking time limit to six minutes, given that there is so much interest and so many Members wish to speak?

7 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). She made what I thought was a rather hard-hitting speech, with much of which I agreed.

One of the themes that have emerged from most of the contributions today is culture. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) was the first to mention the “culture” word, and he was absolutely right to do so. Like others—including, I think, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central—the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), talked about the merits of looking at other systems, not just in the United Kingdom but around the world, to see how they work. I would like to extend that. The focus seemed to be on other legislatures or on public bodies, but I think we should be more ambitious and look at some of the best practice in the organisations in the private sector that have changed their culture.

Let me throw one example into the mix. One of the best culture changes that I saw took place during my time at Asda, when Archie Norman was the chief executive and Allan Leighton was his deputy. They transformed the strongly hierarchical culture in what had been a very “control and command” kind of business when they took over. They revolutionised the way in which managers treated their colleagues, and ensured that everyone was considered to have equal value within the business, whatever their role might be. I think that there would be a great deal of merit in persuading people like Archie Norman and Allan Leighton to come to Parliament and explain how they changed the culture of companies such as Asda. What was done there was a massive feat in itself, and Asda became one of the top businesses in the country in which to work, according to one of the annual polls carried out by The Sunday Times.

Let me stress, in the limited time available to me, that this is a very important issue and we all have a responsibility to try to put things right. Our staff, whoever they are, deserve to be treated properly and with respect. Indeed, why would people who want to get the most out of their staff not treat them properly and with respect? Any sensible manager would want to do that anyway. However, I do not think it helpful to try to use this issue as some kind of witch hunt, or as an attempt to settle scores with the Speaker of the House of Commons. I think
that that has featured far too often in some of the contributions to debates on this subject. Whatever problems there are in the culture of the House, they almost certainly predate the Speaker’s time in the Chair. This is a long-standing issue in the House, and it is absolutely wrong to lay the blame for it at the door of the Speaker.

I have no qualms about criticising the Speaker. As it happens, I was one of those who put their names to the motion of no confidence in the previous Speaker, and I did not vote for the current Speaker to be in his position. At the time of his election, I spent an hour explaining to him all the reasons why I was not going to vote for him, although it was, strictly speaking, a secret ballot. So I have no qualms about, if necessary, telling people why I think that they are unsuitable for that particular role. However, I do not think it either fair or appropriate to use what is a long-standing issue in this place as a way of settling old scores with the Speaker. It is largely people who, like me, did not vote for him in the first place who are using this as a way to say that they still do not want him to be here. This is just a convenient stick with which to beat him. Such action trivialises what is a serious issue for everyone in the House, and I hope that we will caution against it. We all have a role to play in ensuring that we get the culture right.

It is clear to all of us that the culture in the House is not always right. Let us get in people who have expertise in changing cultures in organisations where staff are put at the front and centre. Let us do something positive as a result of the challenge that we face, and use the report to deliver that positive change. Please let us not use this simply as a way to do something negative—to settle scores with someone with whose present position some Members were never reconciled in the first place. I did not vote for the Speaker, but I recognise that it is not the Speaker who is responsible for the problems.

Mrs Miller: I did not intend to intervene, but my hon. Friend must recognise that the report contained some criticism. Is he just dismissing that? I hope that he would not characterise my comments as those of “one of the usual suspects”.

Philip Davies: I know that my right hon. Friend has been outspoken on that particular issue, but she is certainly not at the forefront of my mind. [Laughter.] She has very considered opinions, and I appreciate that. I am not oblivious to it. My point is that whoever had happened to be the Speaker at the time when the report was written, the same issues would have been raised in it. I do not think that it constitutes a specific criticism of this individual Speaker. This is a much deeper and more widespread problem than that. Anyone who thinks that these issues have only arisen since the current Speaker took his position knows, deep down, that that really is not the case.

Andrew Bridgen: Given his argument, does my hon. Friend believe that the culture in this place can change if the current Speaker remains in position?

Philip Davies: Yes, I do. I have no reason to think otherwise in my dealings with the Speaker. People take others as they find them. I think that this goes much wider than the current incumbent. As my hon. Friend knows, I agree with him wholeheartedly on virtually every issue, but I am afraid that on this one we must part company. I do not think it helpful to make it into a personal vendetta against one individual in the House. The culture goes much deeper than that.

Let us use the report to do something positive. Let us get people in who can help, but let us not make this into a personal vendetta on the part of people who were never reconciled to the current incumbent of the Chair in the first place. That is not helpful, and, to be fair, in many respects it does not do justice to the people whom we actually need to help: people who work in the House of Commons, either as the staff of Members of Parliament or as other staff members. We can do this without needing to go for what I would consider to be the very nuclear option that my hon. Friend proposes, which I do not think would make a blind bit of difference in itself. The problem goes much deeper than that.

7.8 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the House of Commons Commission. I also thank Dame Laura Cox for her report on the bullying and harassment of Commons staff.

The Commission recognises that it has a statutory responsibility for the employment of House staff, but too often has failed in its duty to provide a workplace free from bullying and harassment. The report described an institutional failure to address a problem that has undermined the legitimacy and authority of the House. As others have said, bullying and harassment have no place in the House or in any other area of public life. The Commission is determined to take immediate steps to rectify past mistakes and offer robust protection and support to all who work here.

As Members will know, the Commission met on Wednesday 24 October to discuss the report’s recommendations and consider a way forward. Members of the Commission, including the Clerk of the House and the director general, were unanimous in recognising that it is time for a change, and agreed to the three fundamental recommendations in Dame Laura’s report. This decision was reinforced at a further meeting on Monday 29 October.

We agreed to terminate the Valuing Others policy and the Respect policy, to expand the new independent complaints and grievance scheme to enable House employees with historic allegations to access it—although we have heard the Leader of the House point out that that is available to them already—and to ensure that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament is an entirely independent process in which Members play no part. Work will start on this immediately with the Leader of the House and with input from the Chair of the Standards Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards—the widest scheme possible, perhaps in the way the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was asking for earlier.

The Commission is also committed to preventing any further bullying and harassment of, and sexual misconduct towards, staff, and has directed the Commons Executive Board to produce an action plan, in consultation...
with a wide range of stakeholders. This will be taken forward under the auspices of the external members of the Commission, drawing on independent and external advice.

Since the publication of the Dame Laura Cox inquiry report, the Commons Executive Board has been leading events with House of Commons staff to hear their reactions. Judging by their comments at these meetings, the mood of many staff members is a mix of anger at past events, disappointment at the failure of the House to deal with them adequately, and concern about whether lasting change can happen. This is perhaps an example of the toxic lack of trust that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) referred to.

The right hon. Lady also referred to section 149 of the public sector equality duty and said that it applies to the House. There may be an argument about whether that is the case, but clearly the House would always want to observe that even if there was not a statutory requirement for it to do so. The right hon. Lady might be interested to know that the Clerk of the House is due to meet the Equality and Human Rights Commission shortly to discuss this matter.

Mrs Miller: I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that the EHRC has put in writing very clearly that the House of Commons is subject to the public sector equality duty. It is the regulator; it made that decision, not the House of Commons.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention, and it is on the record.

There is concern, too, that these issues might be used as an opportunity to score political points, perhaps losing sight of the fact that this is about real people who are hurt and let down by their place of work and how their complaints were handled.

What is clear is that fine words are not enough: change must follow, and swiftly. As we move forward, the Commission has confidence that the new independent complaints and grievance scheme will offer far greater protection for staff members than ever before. The behaviour code, for example, is a set of inarguable standards by which we must all abide, regardless of rank, power or allegiance. The code has now been adopted by both Houses, and no one may regard themselves as exempt from these standards. However, as many Members have said, there is a deeper issue beyond policies and processes: this is about the culture of the House, especially in relation to deference, hierarchy and the abuse of power. This theme resurfaces repeatedly. We must collectively strive to change fundamentally a culture which has tolerated such abuses.

The sentiment in the Commission is to see swift action, but action that must be effective at securing lasting and permanent change. An action plan focused on addressing the cultural fault-lines that persist in dividing the Commons community is being developed with external input and individual staff input seen as critical. This plan will be informed by the voices of staff, who have signalled their impatience to see concrete actions—actions that will, once and for all, address the serious issues that undermine the quality of their working environment and make the change lasting and permanent.

But it would be foolish and foolhardy to suggest that an immediate action plan implemented over months will in itself change a culture that has developed over many, many decades. Lasting and sustainable culture change requires a movement. We all have a role to play. The bullying of House staff is perpetrated by both Members and by other House staff; these are equally unacceptable but will require different remedies. Soon, there will be decisions and choices to be made by this House, and I hope that all Members will recognise the responsibility they have and the role they can play in changing the culture of the Commons for the better and for good.

Every member of the parliamentary community has a right to feel safe and respected. The Dame Laura Cox inquiry report clearly shows that this is not the case. This must, and will, change, and that change starts now.

7.14 pm  

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) who sits on the Commission, and I am grateful for his account of the Commission’s discussions and intentions. He threw into his remarks references to culture, and “culture” is a word that drops into this debate quite easily. I will discuss later in my remarks how we should perhaps be exploring what we mean by the word and how we might address the culture. He said that “deference, hierarchy and the abuse of power” are in the culture and that we all have a role to play, and he went on to discuss what all Members must do, but I look around this Chamber now and do not see all Members here. In fact, I see a rather small minority of Members here, and part of the problem is that the whole of the House of Commons is not engaged.

I look upon Dame Laura Cox’s report as a very serious piece of work setting out very big challenges, but I do not think it is the first word and I doubt very much that it will be the last word; I gather we are to have another inquiry into a different aspect, concentrating more on the way in which Members treat their staff. It is important that we get above this and think about how we can develop a conversation about what sort of House and institution we want to be, how we are going to develop our personal behaviour—our individual values, our principles—in order to advance that objective, and how we engage all Members in that conversation.

I was very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for quoting words that I well remember drafting as part of the submission that the Committee I chair made to the Straw Committee on the future governance of the House. The point I was making in those words, which referred to governance, leadership, values, attitudes and behaviour, was not that the changes to the governance structure would fix the problems. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said that we need to democratise the governance of the House, and I am certain that we do need to make transparency and accountability more evident, but these things in themselves will not solve the problem.

To some extent I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who referred in person to the office of Speaker. I have not been part of any campaign to remove the Speaker as a result of the
Cox report, because he is but one figure in the House who is accounting for the culture of this place; there are far more people giving permission for the wrong behaviours and wrong attitudes than just one person, and we must keep that perspective in mind.

The question we perhaps need to ask about the House of Commons Commission if we are not satisfied with its conduct is that old friend Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Maybe there needs to be some kind of informal, or perhaps formal, oversight body that discusses what the Commission does and that gets it to report more formally than it does, but I do not suppose that that will actually deal with the problems we have got.

In the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee submission to the review of the House of Commons code of conduct we point out that governance and compliance are not synonymous, and that structures and procedures can embed change and culture but cannot on their own create the right culture. What we need to think and talk far more about is what we mean by our values. When we sit in the Tea Room with our colleagues we do not talk much about values. What do we mean by values? Values are about the way in which we should seek to live and, incidentally, to lead. Our values should be evident in the way in which we lead and in the principles by which we conduct ourselves in this place and in our lives. The rules, which are enforceable and whose breach will cause punishment, are a relatively ancillary question, yet so much of the debate is about creating new rules and punishments and not about explaining how we live our lives better in this institution.

The big question is: how do we hold this conversation? When the House divided on these matters a little while ago, barely 100 colleagues voted and I should not imagine that 100 colleagues took part in the debate either. How do we hold this conversation about the values and principles that we want to demonstrate in our leadership of public life and that should be evident throughout our entire institution?

7.20 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Like everyone else who has read Dame Laura Cox’s report, the other members of the Committee on Standards and I were shocked by its contents. We were horrified to read of the extent of the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff by some Members and by some senior staff, and dismayed that so many feel that they have been ill served by the House authorities in their attempts to be heard and to have redress. That cannot continue. Every single one of us bears responsibility in this matter, and, all hon. Members need to read this report and reflect seriously on our own conduct. Could any of us have been guilty of bullying behaviour or harassment of staff? Have we witnessed or heard reports of such behaviour by others but failed to act? How, collectively and individually, do we change behaviours and, most importantly, the culture in this place?

It is barely three months since the House put in place the independent complaints and grievance scheme, which is aimed at tackling bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. While Dame Laura Cox acknowledges that the new process contains much that is of value—I commend the Leader of the House and her steering group for their efforts and determination in introducing the new scheme three months ago—she makes such fundamental criticisms of it that the House will have to revisit aspects of the scheme. Indeed, the House of Commons Commission has moved quickly to accept her three key recommendations: that the Valuing Others and Respect policies should be scrapped; that complaints relating to historical allegations should be heard; and that complaints by House of Commons staff against Members of the House should be determined through “an entirely independent process, in which Members of Parliament will play no part”.

This gives rise to detailed questions about implementation, and about ownership and responsibility for driving forward the recommendations for the implementation of the Cox report. There is a danger that we will fall into a vacuum. Mr Speaker and the Members on the House of Commons Commission have, to a degree, and for understandable reasons, stepped back from the process, leaving the task to the two external members, who have asked the executive board to draw up an action plan. However, there are issues that go further than those that a board of officials can deal with. The wider House, the political parties, the Committee on Standards, individual MPs and individual House staff have responsibilities too.

The Cox recommendations must be implemented in a way that inspires the confidence of those who have made complaints of abuse, and of the wider public. The outcome that we seek might be no involvement by Members, but we need to recognise that Members will be involved to some extent in designing the process. The Committee on Standards, which includes elected and non-elected members, is the mechanism that the House has set up to advise it. Final decisions, particularly on a new system of sanctions, will have to be taken by the House. We will have to think carefully about how we can discharge those responsibilities in a way that inspires public confidence. The Committee on Standards has already begun to think about measures that we could take, which we might recommend in our report shortly, to strengthen people’s perception of and trust in the system that we hope will apply in the future, as well as the system that we brought in on 19 July. Existing complaints will have to be dealt with under that system until further changes are made.

I want briefly to mention two or three of the quick wins that I hope the House will consider in the near future when my Committee brings forward our report and its recommendations. We hope to do that very soon. The first proposal is to extend full voting rights not only to the elected members of the Committee on Standards but to the lay members as well. Dame Laura Cox has criticised the Committee as inadequate for purpose in its current form. Offering full voting rights to the lay members would strengthen and embed the independence of the Committee, because those members would form a de facto majority on the Committee. There would be equal numbers of lay and non-lay members, but the Chair has only a casting vote.

Other immediate and much simpler steps include giving the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards the right to go to the police with matters that she believes need criminal investigation without having to consult the Committee first, and abolishing the requirement that complaints to the Commission have to be submitted
in hard copy only. I am sure that, in the 21st century, we can switch that so that complaints can be accepted via email. These proposals would be without prejudice to the further reasons why more sweeping action needed to give the Cox recommendations full effect. Procedural changes such as these are essential, but as we have heard again and again tonight, it is painfully evident that Dame Laura’s report rings the alarm for the need for wholesale cultural change. This is not a political issue. It is not a constitutional issue. It is simply an ethical issue—an issue of values and morality—and every single one of us has an obligation to ensure that it is treated as such.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There will now be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I call Gillian Keegan.

7.26 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), and I congratulate her on her new role as Chair of the Committee on Standards. Having served as a member of Parliament for only a year and a half, I did wonder whether it was appropriate for me to speak in this debate. I personally have not witnessed many of the things described in the report. However, I do have prior experience of managing thousands of people from different backgrounds and cultures in large companies for more than 27 years, so I might be able to provide some useful insights into industry best practice. I completely agree with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that many companies have gone through this culture change, and that we can learn a lot from them.

As a new MP, however, I can safely say that Parliament is very different from any workplace I have ever seen, and it has a very distinct culture. Parliament is effectively a common workplace for what are in reality 650 separate small businesses, each with their own leadership and teams. This is unusual, and it is probably one of the reasons why this issue has not been effectively tackled earlier. There is no real central control, and certainly no central HR support. The reputation of Parliament is vital, because we have the responsibility to pass legislation—not least, employment law itself. Dame Laura Cox’s report shows us beyond all doubt that our present approach is not working. It is letting staff down, and we should again follow best practice, with a simple, well-understood, consistent, confidential, independent and, above all, fast escalation process. There are some existing policies in this area, but the Cox report clearly states that they are overly complex and do not enjoy the confidence of our colleagues working in Parliament. In order to cleanse the system, we need to show that we take the issue seriously, acting when required with full transparency, and we must be seen to do that.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Given my hon. Friend’s extensive experience in business, what does she think the House should do about historical allegations? What lessons can be learned from the private sector?

Gillian Keegan: I had this conversation with someone at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and I asked what they do in business, and he said that there is no time limit for sexual harassment, but that they impose some kind of time limit on bullying and harassment, because cultures and expectations have changed over time. I am not suggesting that for this place, but that is what somebody at the CIPD advised, and we could examine what different industries do, because most people have already faced this issue.

Chris Bryant: The most basic thing that every serious company does is ensure that there is a proper HR function to provide support whenever it is needed. When new Members come into the House, some may have employed hundreds of people, but some may have never employed another person and may be desperate for more support. Should we not put far more energy into that if we are to prevent such problems?

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. It is unfair to expect a simple, well-understood, consistent and fair process if we have not trained people about that expectation. In business, people would be given induction training on the standards and then top-up training every year, and whether the top-up training had been done would be publicised.

Dame Laura Cox’s report runs to 155 pages and I agree with all its points. The answer, however, is perhaps simpler than the length of the report suggests. This is about prevention and cure. It is about being seen to take action. It is about each and every one of us demonstrating the correct behaviours and showing, by example, our commitment to make this great institution a modern, respectful, inclusive workplace fit for the 21st century. It is not about trying to scapegoat individuals or outsourcing the solution to a Committee or indulging in a trial by media. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if we tried to suggest that others are responsible for our collective failings, we will certainly demonstrate that we have not at all grasped the systemic nature of the problem we face.
Let us remember that we are all collectively responsible for this system, and we must work together to improve it. Even though, as the report is keen to point out, the vast majority of MPs are courteous and entirely respectful of staff, our reputations sink or swim together. If each and every one of us takes steps to implement Dame Laura’s report, and if we report on progress at regular intervals, we will begin the journey to better support our staff and to recover our reputation, which goes to the heart of the credibility of this place.

7.33 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan)—I will call her my hon. Friend—and I think she made some important points. I want to start by saying that I have absolutely every faith in the Leader of the House’s commitment to make the situation better. I also have every faith in the new Chair of the Committee on Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). I do not think that many people could question her unfailing commitment to equality over the years, and people should feel real faith in those institutions and in all the people in the Chamber—there are not enough of us here—who have bothered to come to talk about this.

I say once again that anyone who has any historical complaints should absolutely come forward. In fact, the legal advice given during the creation of the system that we have now does not mince its words, stating:

“Retroactive effect is therefore regarded as desirable.”

It says that it is better that we look back in retrospect. Unlike some Conservative Members, I am not going to lean on business for the best option. Arcadia, for one, is an organisation that I would not currently be taking any advice from, but it is with my interest in Sir Philip Green that I want to ask some questions about how this House uses non-disclosure agreements. I am really interested in the subject, but I still have no idea about how most things actually work in here. It is a mystery to most people. I want to know who signs off a non-disclosure agreement in this building against a member of staff, because I do not have a clue. I know that in business, someone at board level would have to see some of that when big pay-outs are being made, but I do not know who has governance and oversight of that in this building. How will those things be dealt with going forward? Will any new inquiries report on whether we think it is appropriate to use NDAs in repeated cases where the perpetrator is the same person clearly showing a pattern of behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: To answer the hon. Lady’s question directly, I have also been concerned about this matter. I asked the House authorities about it and was told:

“Like many other organisations, the House of Commons uses settlement agreements to resolve employment disputes under certain circumstances but these are not what are known more widely as ‘non-disclosure agreements’ and that settlement agreements do not in any way seek to prevent whistle-blowing or the disclosure of facts on public interest grounds.”

Jess Phillips: I thank the Leader of the House for that answer. I think some real clarity going forward about what we as parliamentarians in this place will and will not accept should certainly be part of how we improve something that I think we have already improved. As somebody who has been a critic of this place and some of the people in it, I want to say that I think that we have tried to make real strides. Historical cases have been talked about a lot today, but the situation needs to be made much clearer and more robust. I heard the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House sharing a real commitment to that today, which gives me hope.

I agree with the idea of democratising the House of Commons Commission because, once again, I do not know how someone gets to be on it or how to be the spokesperson for it. I will go on the Commission and on the Committee on Standards now that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston has made a gap—I will go on all the Committees. Part of the problem is that there is no real accountability for who is on what and what is being said where, and if I do not know that, it is likely that the vast majority of Members will not know that, because I take an interest, and also that the public will not have a clue about what is going on.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made an important point about having a log on which things can just be recorded without action necessarily being taken. Third-party reporting is another issue, because I have received some harrowing reports of behaviour by people in this place, but I know that the people will never come forward and say anything. I am then left with my hands tied knowing some of those things, and we need some system so that we do not end up in a Jimmy Savile situation in which everybody says, “Well, we all knew. Everybody knew he was a bit like that. Of course he was.” We need a place where Members of Parliament and members of staff—anybody around this place—can, without prejudice, log something somewhere so that we can see the patterns.

It would be wrong of me to say that this process has been pleasant for all those who had to come forward, and who are still having to keep on pushing. Unless we get this right pretty quickly, trust and faith in this place will be gone—they are already pretty low. Each and every one of us should take on the responsibility of making sure this does happen.

7.40 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I speak partly as Vicky Ford, but also as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, which I am very honoured to have recently taken up. Since I have been in this House, a vast majority of Members have been hugely helpful and have shown great respect to me as a newish Member. It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who sits on the Women and Equalities Committee, the Chair of which is here today. There has been a huge amount of work on this debate.

The Dame Laura Cox report makes for harrowing reading. It cannot be swept under the carpet, and it is very clear that culture change is needed. Although the culture has gone on for many, many years, it cannot continue and, as Dame Laura says, the reset button has to be pressed. I am extremely pleased to hear that the Leader of the House has set up a new independent complaints and grievance procedure because, in the past, people who have suffered have not felt confident about coming forward with their complaints. People need
a safe space, and the system needs to be confidential. Many people have spoken about that, but it is almost more important to make sure that we reset the culture so that such incidents do not happen again. We must try to make such incidents far less likely.

I have said before in this Chamber that we are living through an incredibly tense time in politics, and a very stressful time in British politics. My experience is that we often say things we regret when we are stressed. There is no excuse for that, but if we can work somehow to try to destress some of our working lives, maybe that will contribute to a change in culture.

Many people have said to me that one thing they find stressful about this place is the lack of predictability. It is not necessarily mothers wanting to have shorter hours—actually, a lot of people who travel from further afield say that they want to work long hours when they come to London—but not knowing what is coming next can be challenging. There are times when an urgent question is an important question but, Mr Deputy Speaker, urgent questions are not always urgent—sometimes they are just important—yet we all run around rescheduling our lives. If we could set time aside for important issues, without needing to have that higher level of stress—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure you are not trying to influence the Chair in making decisions on urgent questions, as that is done in the morning and not at this particular time.

Vicky Ford: I am not suggesting it is you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was just hoping that you would register the point.

It has also been said that, as we often sit late, it would help people with caring responsibilities if more sitting days could start at 9.30 am and if some Select Committees did not always send out their reports for us to review over the weekend but gave us a bit more time to submit comments. There is also stress because of the nature of online abuse that Members receive. We need to be careful about the language we sometimes use—we saw this in the press the other day—because, if we use violent language, it can encourage violence against others.

Lots of people have spoken about the need to improve training and HR, and some of that is in place, but there is not a great deal of awareness of it.

I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to a report on sexual harassment and violence against women in Parliaments across Europe. The report looks at 45 different Parliaments, and there is great work happening in Switzerland, Sweden, France and Finland, and in the European Parliament. We have taken some of the same initiatives, but it would be worth looking at that report to see whether there are lessons that can be learned from those Parliaments, which all face similar issues to this Parliament. If we do not adopt similar procedures, we should give a jolly good excuse for why we have not, otherwise we could find that we have not taken on good practice.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to the next urgent question.

7.44 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank Dame Laura Cox and all those who contributed to this report, particularly those who have been the victim of bullying and harassment. I appreciate that it cannot have been easy for them to come forward, even under the condition of anonymity, to recall experiences that we have heard about only in outline. I was disturbed to read that some people did not even wish to come forward to give evidence for fear of losing their job, which tells us about the mountain we have to climb.

As other Members have said, there are some fairly obvious procedures we could adopt to help improve the situation, but we are deluding ourselves if we think that introducing a few new procedures, or removing some high-profile people, will be enough. From what Members have already said today, it is clear that a few cosmetic changes will not have the desired effect if the same atmosphere that has allowed these problems to exist in the first place remains.

The bigger challenge for us all will be ridding this place of the culture that is described in the report as “widespread, enduring and profound”, and one that is “as embedded as it is shocking.”

The unhealthy atmosphere of servility and entitlement leaps from the pages of the report. Perhaps when we become caught up in all the drama of this place, we forget that this is far removed from what a modern workplace looks like.

I am sure that most Members remember the whirlwind of the initial few weeks after first being elected to this place. The conventions, the courtesies and just trying to find the way around are huge challenges. In no time at all, a new Member has to get used to this place, start representing their constituents and, of course, recruit a group of staff to help them do so. I understand that new Members’ inductions have improved greatly in recent years, but even three years ago it was obvious to me that one area that is sorely lacking is employment guidance and HR advice. Basically, no advice was available. When a person enters an environment in which their power as an employer is absolute, and where there is a culture of impunity going back decades—for many new Members it will be the first time they have employed someone directly—it is little wonder that, from time to time, things go wrong.

There are two clear actions that we need to take following the Cox report, and I say that in a collective sense. One of the more unhelpful aspects of this has been the way reports have been sensationalised and individualised, with a one-sided trial by media that does no good for the victims, for the accused or for Parliament as a whole. Everybody deserves the right to a fair hearing, no matter who they are. Disputed allegations—as far as I can see, they are all disputed—require due process, and one of the recommendations of the Cox report will enable us to have that.

I am pleased that there appears to be no barrier to pre-2017 complaints, because I am concerned that the further review that we have talked about today will not be enough on its own. The only thing that will be enough is the sort of procedure that Dame Laura Cox refers to when she talks about the need for individual investigations to be conducted.

“by someone whose status, independence, expertise and experience are beyond question”.

Dame Laura Cox says that it has to be a rigorous and transparent process that is seen to be fair to both sides. As the report makes clear, the person investigating complaints against Members ought to be
“more than capable of recommending an appropriate sanction.”

This process needs to start happening now, because some victims have already been waiting years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned non-disclosure agreements, on which I have previously commented. I appreciate that there will be considerations when entering into such agreements, not least the complainant’s wishes. People who work here may be privy to information that is of interest to the outside world, but when it looks like every complaint is subject to an NDA, no matter what the complaint is about, it adds to the impression that this is an institution that does not like scrutiny of its internal workings.

Connected to that, staff have indicated to me that such is the insularity of this place, and such is the culture of fear about speaking out, that they do not want to be seen to be talking to Members about issues in case it gets back to their line manager. The fact that the staff handbook specifically prevents employees of the House from complaining to their own Member about workplace issues says to me that there is far too much defensiveness. If an employer in my constituency told their staff not to speak to me, I would be on to them straightaway. That is one huge reason why we cannot let this issue slip any further down the agenda.

I came to this place to fight for better working conditions for everyone in this country. If we cannot get our own house in order, how can we effectively challenge the worst employment practices out there? We should actually be more than that; we should be a beacon, an exemplar of best practice, and the standard others look up to and try to emulate. Yes, this is not like any other workplace, there are pressures here, and we are all human and sometimes standards can slip, but plenty of other workplaces face huge pressures and people there do not go out routinely bullying and harassing their staff, and then covering it up. So the toxic environment of deference and impunity has to go. We need to get the sense of pride people have in working here set through infected into the House from complaining to their own Member in case it gets back to their line manager. The fact that such is the insularity of this place, and such is the internal workings.

All this compounds a sense of “us and them” for the thousands of non-Members who work here. Staff have told me that when walking around this building they feel like “second-class citizens”. When I have mentioned that, some MPs have told me that they think it is okay—I was staggered. Although I can see the case for access to be limited to some places, such as this Chamber, I do not know of any modern workplace that has so many no-go areas for the majority of its staff. It is time for us to face some uncomfortable truths about the culture of deference that has allowed bullying and harassment to thrive. We must make sure everyone can share more equally in the benefits and privileges of working here.

This is a unique institution, but it is also a workplace, like any other. Most modern workplaces of a similar size have a host of structures in place to protect staff and to support them, help them to cope when things get tough and make the most of their skills and potential. They have things like appraisals, performance reviews, regular staff surveys, informal check-ins and 360° feedback, and so how well a member of staff manages people counts in respect of their performance, pay and promotion prospects. All these things should be a formal part of changing the system and the culture fundamentally in this place. Everyone who works here, from caseworkers...
to clerks to catering staff, contributes to the effective running of our democracy, and they all deserve to be treated fairly and treated better.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry, but I have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

7.55 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The power of the Dame Laura Cox report sits in the fact that the voices of staff across the House had the opportunity to be aired. As she held up a mirror to the institutions of this place, it spoke truth to power, which is why I am heartened by the fact that all in this House are listening carefully to the words she set out. The report cuts to the heart of what is wrong with the culture of this place: the huge inequality in power that sits in the seat of Parliament. Everybody is here to do a job and they should be valued equally, but we see a hierarchy of entitlement. We therefore have to see the structures move and the place move. I suggest to the Leader of the House that one way to do that is to start by looking at how reviews are brought about and to work with the trade unions and recognise them. They are the very voice of the staff in this place and we need to make sure they have got a seat at the table to take things forward. When they are involved, as they have been in this process, they add real value: they reflect exactly what is happening on the ground.

There are several points I wanted to make but time does not allow me. However, I say to the Leader of the House that we have no definition of “bullying” in statute; we have no recourse to legislation. Such a definition would seriously change the context, as we would have legal levers over what happens with bullying. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 is the lever that can be used, but it is totally inappropriate because it was set up to deal with stalking.

We do need to deal with processes in this place as well. I urge again that we look at the emphasis that is put on mediation when we are dealing with systems where there is huge inequality in power. There is too much in the report to highlight how mediation can solve problems—I say that simply because inequality of power will drive things forward. We need to heed the report when it talks in paragraph 227 about “serious questions over the coherence of all the current arrangements in place for dealing with these cases” and in paragraph 291 about how the processes will “damage the prospects of success for this new Scheme” if they are not right.

Of course that takes us on to historical cases, which absolutely must be looked at. The legal representation did not draw out the arbitrary date of June 2017 and nor should these processes, moving forward. Therefore, it is absolutely right that we do not just allow voice and agency over what has gone wrong in this place, but we see action. We need investigation and then to look at what penalties were available at the time the bullying or harassment took place. I have already made representations to the Leader of the House on the vital need to have a tariff of penalty across the House, so that different institutions are not applying different penalties and so that there is real transparency in the way this works.

I also want to raise my concern, as I have before, about the role of the Committee on Standards. We need to pull this process far more into an independent space than by having MPs arbitrating on the behaviour of their colleagues. That is completely inappropriate, and again it speaks of inequality of power in this place. I therefore urge the Leader of the House to look at that as she moves on taking forward the recommendations that Dame Laura Cox has diligently pored over, to start really bringing redress to this culture, because this is about our future and about the future of the staff who work so hard in this place.

7.59 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who speaks passionately on this topic.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) referred to section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, which put a duty on organisations to eliminate unlawful victimisation, discrimination and harassment. The irony of the year of that law was probably not lost on those people who came forward with complaints. What the hell have we been doing? Apologies for that inappropriate language, Madam Deputy Speaker. What the devil have we been doing since 2010, when we imposed on the rest of the country laws that we cannot impose in our organisation?

I feel like I have been going through a degree of penance. I have five brothers, so I grew up in a very male household, and I went to an all-boy secondary school. I studied civil engineering at university, which was almost entirely male, and then worked on a building site. In fact, I did not come across women in the workplace until I was 27, and I have no doubt that I had developed some sexist attitudes. I then went to work for an American company that employed probably 70% women and my eyes were opened. I suddenly realised that women are not just the equal of men; in very many if not most cases, they are definitely our superiors.

We in the Conservative party frequently congratulate ourselves because we have had two female Prime Ministers, but although that is something to celebrate, it is certainly not something to hide behind. Frequently, when I stand in the Chamber at Prayers at the start of the day, as I turn to face the wall, I see only men on our side of the Chamber. That is terrible, because those members of staff who work in the rest of the House must see the Conservative party as one that has not done enough to promote and encourage women. That is why I am keen and proud to support the “Ask Her to Stand” initiative.

I come back to the legislation. Section 149 of the 2010 Act should have eradicated the problems that we are discussing today, but it has not. The problem we have now is that we need to move quickly enough to be seen to be acting promptly, but not to move so quickly that we make inappropriate laws or take inappropriate action, because the other thing of which the Laura Cox report was critical was the fact that we are so reactionary in this House. Something happens and we need to be seen to be doing something about it, so we implement some changes, but they are not embedded, sufficient or sustained.

Many people have said that we perhaps need some sort of HR training, but I think that as a bunch of adults we understand inappropriate behaviour when we
see it, and we need to do more to call it out. It is simply not good enough. I speak from a privileged position because, as a male MP, I am perhaps least likely to suffer from bullying, but we certainly need to do more about it. We need to make sure that people are proud to work in this place and that in no circumstances do they ever come to work in fear of their jobs. We need to do more and we can do more. From now on, we will do more.

8.3 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I agree with nearly every word that the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) just said, apart from one thing: I do not think that everybody does necessarily know what inappropriate behaviour is. He was right in what he said about women, and I completely endorse everything he said in that respect. When I first arrived here in 2001, as a gay man, I certainly faced bullying in this place. We have to be alert to the fact that we can all still learn more about the way we present ourselves and how we behave. There is not a single Member of this House who could not benefit from proper training, because the biggest driver of cultural change in any institution in the world is always education and training. That is what we need to do more of in this House.

I know that in a few moments the Leader of the House is going to mouth at me, “But we are doing it!” We are, and lots of training is available, but sometimes it is not very well advertised; sometimes people are not aware of when it would be available to them; and sometimes it is put on at a time when a Member simply would not be able to go. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) was absolutely right to make the point about predictability. Sometimes, we might want to go and do a training programme and we simply cannot, because suddenly something happens in the parliamentary day that makes it impossible for us to go.

Incidentally, there is something that the Speaker could help us with. When a debate under Standing Order 24 is decided the day before and is it not going to be voted on, why do we not hold that debate at the end of the day, rather than at the beginning, so that Members can have the certainty of being able to go home at the time at which they thought they would go home? That would mean that we could still have important debates such as the one we had on Yemen, but it would not necessarily make life difficult for everybody.

I completely agree with the Leader of the House about democratising the Commission. I have worked in many institutions, including the Church of England and the BBC, and I am now here—it is like a Daily Mail terrible headline, is it not?—and in all those institutions, the problem is that all too often the institution’s first reaction when there is an action or story against it is to defend itself. That has happened here in the House, for the whole House, but it is also intrinsic in the nature of the Commission, because each of the Commission’s members is appointed by their party political leader. It would be better if we elected the Commission and it started to behave more as a team, rather than just one person leading for the whole House.

One thing that I have been asked by a large number of staff, particularly women, who work here is whether we could do something about lighting in the House. When we did work on disabled access to the building for the restoration and renewal report, the thing that came up most was that the building is very dark. People cannot read their papers. There are parts of the building that feel dangerous. If we are to talk about safety, why not light the public access ways and the corridors, so that the corridors of power are not a frightening place?

Finally, many members of staff have seen what has happened in relation to this issue and despaired because they think change is never really going to be possible. Do not despair. Even in the time for which I have been here, there have been changes. Portcullis House is a far more democratic space than many of the eating places and drinking places in this part of the estate—and guess what? That is where everybody gathers. MPs, their staff and people who work for the House all gather there together. Change is definitely possible. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, we now have an induction programme; we should have a really good induction programme. Would it not be great if every single member of the Cabinet and the shadow Cabinet and all the members of the Commission committed by the end of this week to do full training on bullying and harassment within the next 12 months?

8.7 pm

Andrea Leadsom: With the leave of the House, I wish to make a few short closing remarks. First, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who showed some optimism and pointed to some good quick wins. He is right that things have changed. There is a lot more to be done, but things have changed.

Let me highlight some of the things that have changed. First, all staff here can access the independent complaints and grievance procedure, and I urge them to do so. Secondly, I would like people to be aware that all calls and complaints are strictly confidential. Nobody will have their details publicised or have to face retribution for coming forward with a complaint. Thirdly, historical allegations can and should be brought forward to the complaints procedure. They can already be brought forward. Finally, there is much more to be done, and the Cox report, plus the independent inquiry into complaints by Members’ staff that begins tomorrow, will guide much further work to change the culture here. Change is afoot and there is much more change to come.

I conclude today’s informative debate by thanking the House of Commons staff and everyone who works here for making our Parliament such a formidable pillar of democracy on the world stage. To all those staff, I say you are valued, you are vital to this democracy, and we will do better by you in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Dame Laura Cox report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff.
Road Safety

8.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety.

This debate is, in its own way, of no less importance than the one that preceded it, and to many people around this country it is of still greater importance. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue of road safety. With 500 people killed or seriously injured on our roads every week, there is no Member of this House whose constituency and whose person is not affected by the impact that road collisions have on their constituents. Road safety touches all of us, whether rural or urban, pedestrian, cyclist, horse rider or driver.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On the horse riders, may I bring to my hon. Friend's attention the B3058 as it travels through Bashley where I have witnessed the most shocking and thoughtless behaviour? The principal victims are horse riders, as they are throughout the New Forest often enough. Was not an opportunity missed in the revision of the Highway Code in not specifically dealing with the problems faced by riders and appropriate measures that motorists should take?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the concern in his own constituency. He may not be aware that, actually, horse riders are mentioned in the Highway Code. Measures are taken in the Highway Code to ensure the protection of horse riders alongside other users of the road.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the issue of horse riding, I took up the challenge to get back on a horse this summer after many years of not riding and to experience for myself how dangerous it is on the road. It is very clear that drivers need greater awareness. Will the Minister possibly champion the work of the British Horse Society and its “Dead? Or Dead Slow?” campaign in this area?

Jesse Norman: The British Horse Society has shown itself to be a formidable campaigning engine in the way that it has managed to lobby my colleagues across the House, and I take my hat off to it. The very first debate in which I took part in my present job was a Westminster Hall debate on the safety of horse riders on roads. Ever since then I have had a very careful concern for the matter.

Indeed, road safety comes up regularly in this House. Only two weeks ago, I was debating the matter in Westminster Hall. Many colleagues then wished to speak, and I see that many have put their names down for speeches today. I am very grateful to them for the continued interest that they take in this important topic.

On this night, bonfire night, our thoughts may turn to those who have been involved in one of the most serious traffic incidents in recent times. Thirty-four vehicles were involved in a crash on the M50 motorway in heavy fog, with 51 people injured and seven people killed on 4 November 2011. Thankfully, such events are a rarity. In the UK, we have—and we must remember this—some of the safest roads in the world, but all road deaths are a tragedy for the families involved, not to mention the impact that they have on our health service and on the economy. It is vital that we strive continually to bring the numbers down.

The latest road safety statistics, covering 2017, were published last month. The country can be proud of the record over time. That is to say that there were 39% fewer fatalities in 2017 compared with 10 years earlier in 2007. However, as in many other countries, our road safety figures have generally plateaued since 2012. An ageing population comes with higher injury risks, and there continues to be those groups, such as young drivers, that are disproportionately represented in our casualty statistics. We know that technologies such as smartphones are distracting to drivers and present challenges, but new technology also presents opportunities for the future with a new era of automated vehicles.

The Government are taking a very active and wide-ranging approach to tackling issues of road safety in relation to matters such as infrastructure, training and enforcement. Of course, the roads themselves are a key part of ensuring an adequately safe system.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the last 12 to 18 months, there has been a number of accidents in Coventry as a result of criminal behaviour, and they have led to deaths, including among young children.

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise what the hon. Gentleman says and the deaths that he describes and it is the constant challenge of the Government to seek to address them. There can be no doubt that at all. I am regularly approached by colleagues who know of grieving families with children. Whenever I can, I meet those families and talk to them about their experience. I have visited around the country with them to experience the trauma that they have suffered and to talk to them about what can be done to improve things, so I absolutely recognise the point that he makes.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend was coming on to the point about infrastructure improvements. In Basingstoke, we are grateful to the Government for the amount of money that we have had on infrastructure improvement, but my constituents were really keen when the Government announced that all of these improvements should be cycle-proofed. Will he give us an update on how that cycle-proofing programme is going?

Jesse Norman: As my right hon. Friend will know, we are in the middle of a safety review of cycling and walking and of vulnerable road users generally, including horse riders and others. We have not yet reported on that. I expect that we will do so by the end of this year, and we will cover a very wide range of potential interventions that improve cycling safety and that go towards better infrastructure.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I know of my hon. Friend's commitment to cycling, which is very welcome, but is he aware that New York City has recently introduced, very cost-effectively, cycle tracks on resurfaced carriageway? Does he think that that is something that the United Kingdom could learn from as a cost-effective way of making cycling safer?
Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I lived in New York City myself for a couple of years and I can tell him that I used to cycle there as well as in London. I am sure whether it has changed much, but it was a lot less safe then there than it is now in London. We as a Department very much wish to learn from all best practice in this area, and we also encourage local authorities and cities to do so. Part of the function of the money that we have given as a Government to supporting city transformation, which, as he will know, reaches not merely the largest five cities, but now 10 and potentially 12 equally substantial cities across the country is very much designed to enable them to think about the kinds of innovative and imaginative interventions in cycling and walking that might include that approach.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. An area of particular concern in my constituency is road safety in the immediate vicinity of schools and the way in which parents and carers bring their children to school by car, stop pretty well immediately outside the school gate with little regard for the fact that other children are crossing and going in and out of the school premises and then drive off without any concern for the road safety of the children around. What can the Minister say about how we can incentivise and encourage best practice across local authorities to ensure that the highest standards of road safety are in place outside all of our schools?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Of course it is a matter not just of specific behaviour around schools, but of speed and the effects not merely of congestion, but on air quality. I will be touching on some of that later in the speech.

The roads we use are only one part of the overall picture of road safety. Earlier this year, we granted £100 million to improve 50 of the most dangerous stretches of A road in England through the Safer Roads fund. We have already seen all of the 50 road schemes receive funding, and we expect the work to be completed by 2020. I was very pleased to note that, in the Road Safety Foundation’s latest publication, “Getting Back on Track”, the most improved road is the A161 in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The improvements to this road were joint funded between the Safer Roads fund and the East Riding of Yorkshire Council.

The Budget last week highlighted the importance of our local road network. The local highway network is one of the most valuable national assets and an essential component of our economy. A good, well-maintained and safe local highway network has never been more important. The House will know that I think we need a substantial approach, and I will outline what that approach is.

Local authorities have an existing legal duty to maintain the highway under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980, as amended. [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) wishes to make an intervention, he is very welcome to do so. If he does not, perhaps he would care to stop chuntering from a sedentary position. Good transport and roads are essential to this country’s economic growth.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say to the Minister that on this occasion I myself was inexcusably chuntering from a sedentary position, for which I apologise. I am normally consumed by the Minister’s speeches, but I was chatting to a colleague so I did not witness the offending behaviour. If there was other chuntering beyond my own inexcusable chuntering, it is not excused.

Jesse Norman: Mr Speaker, it is kind of you to acknowledge your own temporary distraction, but I am afraid that the one to which I was referring was rather more intentional.

Having roads in an acceptable and safe condition is vital to us all, whether we are car drivers, lorry drivers, bus passengers, cyclists, pedestrians or horse riders. In fact, most of us are more than one of those.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am very interested in what the Secretary of State has to say about the state of our local roads. If that is such an important issue, why do we have a £9 billion backlog and why did the Budget only address 5% of it?

Jesse Norman: As hon. Members know, there are many widespread and varying estimates of the backlog. The Government are putting in place a comprehensive programme. We have already seen the largest investment in strategic roads for, I think—in real terms, certainly—the last generation or more. I would like to think that the excellent investments that we have made in pothole fixing will continue in the years to come, but the hon. Gentleman will know that these things are ultimately dependent on the spending review to be announced next year.

Ministers and Members of Parliament receive plenty of correspondence on the matter of potholes. The condition of the road also regularly appears among the top concerns in public opinion surveys, and this was a major issue raised by respondents to our recent cycling and walking safety review call for evidence. That is why a further £420 million was made available to highways authorities in England outside London for highway maintenance—to support authorities to keep bridges and other structures safe and open, to help repair potholes or stop them forming, and to undertake further minor highway works where necessary. We will be announcing individual allocations to highways authorities shortly, but I am sure that Members across the House will welcome this funding, which comes in addition to over £6 billion that we are providing to local highway authorities in England outside London between 2015 and 2021, including £296 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help repair potholes.

The Chancellor also announced a further £1.5 billion in the Budget to improve local traffic hotspots such as roundabouts. It is our intention that this funding will help to improve existing local road junctions, to ease congestion bottlenecks and to improve reliability—not only to improve access, but to make sure that these junctions are safer for all road users. Further details will be announced in due course.

Infrastructure is one thing but effective education is another. We are improving training for new drivers to familiarise them with the conditions that they will encounter on the roads. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency
is developing new materials to improve learners' awareness of hazards in different weather and lighting conditions. As the House will be aware, new legislation is in force allowing learners on motorways when accompanied by an approved driving instructor. Learner drivers are already gaining experience and we will have a new generation of drivers who are confident in using our motorways.

We are also taking action against the most dangerous kinds of behaviour. Evidence repeatedly shows that the use of mobile phones, and drink and drug driving, give cause for concern. Tackling these dangerous forms of behaviour has long been an element of our road safety strategy.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister rightly draws attention to some of the dangerous behaviours that people display when driving. May I return to the issue of horses? Would he consider asking for the Highway Code to be amended to incorporate the British Horse Society’s “Dead Slow” advice?

Jesse Norman: The topic has already been raised. As I have pointed out, there is already guidance relating to horse riders in the Highway Code. I am always delighted to take further suggestions from colleagues and will look further at the question that my hon. Friend raises in the light of this debate.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). This matter becomes ever more pressing. Across the whole country, rights of way are being salami-sliced, piece by piece; and, piece by piece, horse riders are being forced on to the highway. That is why this matter is important, and its importance will only continue to grow.

Jesse Norman: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is very interesting that he makes the point about not only the danger to horse riders, but the reason for that danger. It is therefore rather important that all the unregistered roads and byways are properly acknowledged, notified and recognised in order to make sure that spaces are available for people to be able to ride happily and safely without having to go on to the highway.

Andrew Selous: Further to that point, will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I would be happy to, but there are going to be 18 speeches and I have already spoken for—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say that everybody thinks that he or she is an exception? The trouble is that if we keep having interventions, we simply will not get through the list; sorry.

Jesse Norman: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. We have already taken a tougher stance on drivers who use a handheld mobile phone at the wheel. The penalty doubled to six points and a £200 fine last year, which means that drivers face having their licence revoked if they are caught using a mobile phone while driving. Since 2015, repeat drink-drivers have to prove they are not alcohol dependent medically before getting their licence back. We have also removed the right to a blood test for drivers who narrowly fail a breathalyser test. That has had the effect of denying people the chance to sober up while waiting to take the test. We are also making progress in providing police forces with the next generation of mobile breathalyser equipment, with but currently being assessed in the £350,000 innovation competition run by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety.

To help the police with drug recognition and impairment testing, we have granted £1 million to police forces in England and Wales for equipment, enforcement and training of officers. Alongside that, we announced in June this year a refreshed road safety statement and a two-year action plan. Rather than take an entirely generalised approach, we are specifically focusing on four priority groups: motorcyclists; rural road users; older, vulnerable users; and young road users. At least three of these groups—young people, rural road users and motorcyclists—are continually over-represented in our road casualty statistics, and we have data to confirm that the safety of older road users is a growing concern. Of course, this too will be informed by work from the new road collision investigation project that we have launched, and I am delighted that that will be bringing more in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis so that we can better understand the underlying causes of crashes and road safety incidents.

We are very focused on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable road users. Last year, the Government published our cycling and walking investment strategy, setting out an ambition that walking or cycling should become the natural choices for shorter journeys. But people will only walk and cycle more if they feel safe to do so, which is why earlier this year we launched a cycling and walking investment strategy safety review call for evidence, seeking views on how best to achieve that. We received 14,000 or so responses from people from every imaginable road-user walk of life, including children, parents, local authorities, police forces and more.

Last month, we published a summary of those responses. We are still carefully analysing all contributions, but some trends have already emerged. One of those—this bears very much on the concerns of those who have spoken about horse riders—is the fear of being close-passed, which is extremely scary. It should be noted that this is not merely being passed from behind—overtaking—but passed from the front. Working to tackle that dangerous behaviour is one of the themes in our response. I have had the chance to visit and see in action the excellent work of the West Midlands police, and to talk to police constables Mark Hodson and Steve Hudson about the great initiative they have taken with their colleagues there. My colleagues and I are working to enable other police forces to follow the West Midlands lead with some additional support.

We are piloting safety training for driving instructors so that they can pass the important knowledge of cycle safety on to their pupils. As I said, we will be reviewing parts of the Highway Code. That review will not only highlight how to avoid the dangers of close passing but encourage people to adopt the Dutch reach—a method of opening a car door with the hand furthest from the handle to force drivers to look over their shoulder for passing traffic. We recognise, as I mentioned, that these issues are equally applicable, in many ways, to horse riders. We should be clear that the cycling and walking strategy may have that name but is absolutely targeted at vulnerable road users, including horse riders.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I will, once more, but then I have to get on.

Dr Wollaston: I am really glad to hear the Minister talk about close passing, but it is also about the speed of passing, which he has not mentioned. Will he also look closely at 20-mph limits and how they can be enforced?

Jesse Norman: I am happy to let my hon. Friend know—or she may know—that we already have a consultation out on this, and we expect to report on that later this year.

Many factors go into making our roads safer, including the road environment, the vehicles we drive and behaviour, but so does enforcement. Last October, the Ministry of Justice published its response to a consultation on the penalties for the most dangerous drivers, and Ministers announced that they will introduce life sentences for killer drivers—an increase on the current 14 years. The Government have said that they will create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving, and that Ministers will introduce new legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I welcome this debate. As the House will see, the Government remain energetic, focused and determined in their efforts to improve road safety.

8.31 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Opposition welcome this general debate on road safety. It is a chance to discuss the Government’s record. It is also well timed, as last month the Department for Transport published the 2017 road safety statistics. In recent months, there has been a healthy level of debate in Westminster Hall regarding road safety. We have spoken on the fine work of the Bobby Colleran Trust and the effectiveness of “Bobby zones” around schools; about global road safety; and about the launch of influential reports recommending that the Government change tack with regard to road safety. We therefore welcome today’s debate in the Chamber.

This country has a proud record on road safety and some of the safest roads in the world. In fact, we have the fourth lowest number of road deaths per million inhabitants, behind only Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. We should rightly be proud of this record. Although it is proper to say that Britain has one of the strongest road safety records in the world, we must also recognise that in recent years our record has stagnated. Ministers have said that the picture is mixed and generally heading in the right direction. We cannot be clearer: it is not. It has stalled since 2010. The number of deaths on the road has remained at about the same level since 2011. One road death is an unacceptable tragedy, never mind almost 1,800 in 2017.

As I mentioned, the Government recently published their 2017 figures for reported road casualties in Great Britain. While there are some positives in this latest statistical release, there is also cause for concern—and Ministers are, I believe, well aware of this. In 2017, 1,793 people were killed on our roads, an average of five people every day—five people a day—and just under 25,000 people were seriously injured. As the road safety charity, Brake, points out, that equates to 73 people a day either being killed or seriously injured just going about their daily business. Last year’s annual total was the highest since 2011. I am sure we can all agree that that is completely unacceptable. There has been a sharp decline, over decades, in the number of people being killed or seriously injured on our roads. I reiterate, however, that the figures have not really changed since 2010.

The Government talk a good game about road safety being a top priority, but I am very sorry to say that their legacy so far is one of disappointment and, indeed, failure. The latest figures from the Department for Transport only reaffirm this. Since 2010, progress has well and truly stalled. Another year of statistics has been published, and we are no further forward.

The Government scrapped road targets that successfully reduced the number of people killed or seriously injured by a third under the last Labour Government. The Government tell the shadow Transport team that targets do not achieve anything. We disagree. The Opposition believe that targets focus awareness and attention and, ultimately, help hold the Government to account. All the evidence points to targets being a proven facilitator of achieving road safety improvements, and yet there are no targets to assess progress. The Government set themselves targets to meet in pretty much every other area of policy, but not for reducing road deaths and injuries. Why is that the case? Ministers will be well aware that the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety concluded in a recent report that the Government should look into introducing key performance indicators for road safety in order to improve safety—in other words, it would like targets to be reintroduced.

I want to return to the 2017 figures and seek answers from the Minister on a number of points. Worryingly, an estimated 9,040 people were killed or injured in drink-drive incidents in 2016. That represents a rise of 7% from 2015 and is the highest number since 2012. The number of accidents where at least one driver or rider was over the alcohol limit rose by 6% in 2016. I would like to know what plans the Government have to address that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Would the hon. Gentleman support measures to reduce the allowable drink-drive limit, such as those that the Scottish National party Government have introduced in Scotland?

Matt Rodda: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. That should be looked at and reviewed across the UK as a whole.

I would like to move on to another aspect of this very important area. The 2017 release stated:

“The population of older people (aged 70 and older) has increased relatively rapidly over recent years. This carries implications for higher levels of casualties in this age group in the future.”

What do Ministers propose to do to address that issue? The Minister touched on it, but much more detail is needed. With an ageing population, older road users could become much more vulnerable.

At the other end of the age scale, it is encouraging to hear that the overall number of child casualties of all severities decreased by 2% to 15,721, which is one of the lowest years on record. However, I am sure we can all agree that this figure remains far too high and that the Government must strive to make our roads safer still, especially for vulnerable road users.
Between 2010 and 2016, the number of deaths from road accidents remained broadly consistent, as we have heard. However, the number of pedestrians killed on our roads increased.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that far too many drivers of motor vehicles still seem to assume they always take precedence and that we need a fundamental change in attitude towards pedestrians and cyclists, so that car and lorry drivers start treating non-drivers with respect?

Matt Rodda: I agree with my hon. Friend’s suggestion. He makes an interesting point.

I return to the wider point about vulnerable road users. Although the number of cyclists killed on the roads in 2017 was slightly lower than in 2016, the 101 deaths was very similar to the levels seen since 2010. If we look at where those fatal accidents occurred, of the 1,793 road deaths in 2017, just over 1,000—or 60%—took place on country roads, 626 occurred on urban roads and 99 took place on motorways. That is a 2% increase since 2016. While the number of people injured on motorways has decreased, there was a 6% increase in the number of deaths on motorways. How does the Minister plan to address that important and worrying statistic?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that car advertisements often make people—and particularly younger drivers—feel as if they are invincible to any form of injury, so safe have cars become, according to the ads, which can encourage them to drive in a less focused way?

Matt Rodda: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about younger drivers. They are vulnerable, and we arguably need a better education programme.

To return to my speech, we welcome the targeted approach of the Safer Roads fund to enable local authorities to improve the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England. The fund initially totalled £175 million, of which £100 million is currently being invested. However, the other £75 million originally allocated has been described by the Minister as no longer required. Will the Minister explain why the Department believes this to be the case?

I found it interesting that the RAC Foundation and the Road Safety Foundation recently published a report on the possible benefits of the Safer Roads fund, which estimates that it could prevent almost 1,400 deaths and serious injuries over the next two decades on these very risky A roads in England. Given the need to save lives and the evidence that this fund makes a difference, surely it is important that we spend all the money in the fund. Hazardous A roads across England were denied funding to improve safety for not being dangerous enough. The Transport Network has also asked the Department for Transport what will happen to this money. Again, I urge the Minister to reply on this point later.

The Minister was asked about regulations for tyre safety by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) during the passage of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill in May. He replied that the Government had a process in mind. He has acknowledged that this is a serious issue. Tyres of up to 20 years old have been causing great concern in my area of the Thames valley; and there was a horrific accident in Hampshire a few years ago. I ask the Minister also to respond on this point, if he can, and say where the Government have got to on that important issue.

Opposition Members are also concerned about enforcement, particularly as there has been a 24% fall in the number of traffic officers since 2012. Sadly, that has been part of the Government’s austerity programme. There was no mention in the recent Budget of extra money for regular policing, and since the Conservatives came to power, 21,000 police officers have had their posts cut. In 2010, there were 3,500 police officers patrolling UK roads, but by 2017 that had fallen to just 2,600. It seems that Government cuts to our vital services are putting safety at risk. Austerity is not over, despite the repeated claims from the Government and the Prime Minister, and that is affecting all areas, including road safety.

Two years ago, the Transport Committee produced its “Road traffic law enforcement” review. It concluded: “As the number of traffic police has fallen, so too has the number of road traffic offences detected. However, the number of ‘causing death’ offences…has not fallen. This…suggests that the reduction in overall offences that are recorded does not represent a reduction in offences actually being committed.”

As I have said, the latest road safety figures show there has been an increase in the number of deaths of pedestrians and motorcyclists. The number of cyclists killed has remained broadly constant since 2010. Will the Minister address that issue in his closing remarks?

As the Minister said, the Department for Transport is currently undertaking a cycling and walking investment strategy review. I believe the review is to be welcomed, especially the inclusion of pedestrians. I ask the Minister, who will know that my shadow ministerial brief covers cycling and walking, how he will ensure that this review achieves safer walking and cycling, in line with the cycling and walking strategy’s ambitions.

We welcome the Government’s recent announcement of plans to revise the Highway Code rules relating to pedestrians’ and cyclists’ safety, as campaigned for by many charities and cycling and walking groups. When the Government are carrying out this review, I hope that they will listen to the sector’s concerns, which include speed limits, the use of mobile phones, rules on how much space HGVs and other vehicles should leave when overtaking cyclists—the close passing that the Minister mentioned—and, indeed, how to open car doors safely.

In summary, in our 2017 manifesto Labour pledged to reset the UK’s road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road-safety targets and setting out bold measures to improve safety standards continuously. A future Labour Government would introduce a “target zero” approach to deaths on the roads—a new approach to road safety that does not accept that road deaths and injuries are inevitable. Beyond the obvious benefits to families and society, this policy brings significant financial benefits from avoiding NHS bills, care bills, the costs of transport delays, and costs of lost earnings and production. May I ask the Minister when the Government will commit to such a “target zero” approach?
Finally, I would like to close by saying that although we have one of the safest road networks in the world, which should be celebrated, we should never ever be complacent. More could be done, and a Labour Government would do more. We will continue to press the Government on this matter, and we welcome today’s debate.

Mr Speaker: I call Tracey Crouch.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the hon. Lady. The five-minute limit on speeches takes effect now. We will restart the clock for the speech of the hon. Lady, who five-minute limit on speeches takes effect now. We will continue to press the Government on this matter, and we welcome today’s debate.

Mr Speaker: I call Tracey Crouch.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

8.44 pm

Tracey Crouch: It is a pleasure to speak first in this important debate, thus cementing my status as a former Minister who has resumed their old place on the Back Benches.

I could speak about many issues, including the protection of horses, which others have mentioned, and the worrying growth in young drivers who use seatbelt alarm disablers, which my local fire and rescue service raised.

However, I want to use the brief time I have to raise two very different issues. One was brought to my attention by a local resident, but is of national importance, and the other is a local issue, but is no doubt occurring nationwide.

A month ago, I met my constituent, Sam Cockerill, in my office and heard how her partner, Steve Goldbold, was killed instantly in September 2017 after an HGV strayed on to the hard shoulder of the M25 and hit him while he recovered the vehicle of someone who had broken down. From talking to others in the industry, Sam heard about other recovery operators who had been killed while performing their duties. She also heard how recovery operators live in constant fear while working on the hard shoulder, but got a sense that their voice was not being heard by lawmakers. So in September, she, along with a number of industry figures, launched the Campaign for Safer Roadside Rescue and Recovery, and I want, through this debate, to add my support to it.

I am a confident driver, but I am petrified of breaking down on a motorway, particularly with the enormous increase in the amount of traffic, especially heavy traffic, on our roads and the continued roll-out of all-lane-running motorways to cope with it. However, if I were to break down, I know I can go and sit up on the bank away from the dangers of travelling vehicles—of course, that is not an option for recovery workers. I therefore think that the campaign’s asks to protect those workers are not unreasonable.

First, there is a request for roadside rescue and recovery operators to be able to use prominent red lights while attending accidents and breakdowns. At present, they are only permitted to be fitted with and use amber warning beacons while attending incidents. There are two reasons why using red lights makes sense. First, there is a scientific phenomenon called the Rayleigh effect, which means the red light can be seen further away. Secondly, the colour red elicits a more serious reaction, whether consciously or subconsciously, in the minds of road users approaching a hazard and drivers adjust accordingly.

The second ask is for the Department for Transport to collect data on the number of casualties specifically among recovery workers, as there is currently not a specific variable that captures the number of deaths and injuries of roadside operatives in accidents.

The third ask is to build on the important work done by the Slow Down, Move Over campaign, which seeks to improve awareness through the highway code of protocol for motorists when approaching the scene of an accident or a broken down vehicle. In the USA, the Slow Down, Move Over laws were implemented, and are now in place across all 50 states. Failure to abide by the law is punishable as a moving traffic offence, the same type of offence as drink-driving or speeding.

Finally, the campaign calls for the Government to halt the roll-out of all-lane-running motorways and to implement so-called smart motorways in a way that takes account of the rights of those who work on the hard shoulder, particularly recovery operators.

The campaign is for all those roadside and recovery workers who have experienced near misses or lost their lives, such as my constituent Sam’s partner, Steve. I would be grateful if the Minister in his response committed to meeting me, Sam and others to discuss the matter further so that we can make progress in protecting those who come to our rescue when we need it on our roads.

My next brief point is very different from the first, and is about safety on local roads, particularly roads affected by major housing developments. I have many local road safety issues, relating to junctions such as that at Bull Lane in Eccles or Walderslade Road, Chestnut Avenue or Luton Arches in Chatham, but I really want to emphasise the problems that the village of Wouldham faces as a consequence of poor traffic modelling relating to the new development of Peter’s Village.

In summary, as part of the planning agreement for the new village, a new bridge was built over the River Medway to provide a direct route on to the A228, which in itself provides a link to the M20, the M2 and the fast train to London from Snodland. The plans for that development were all agreed long before I was even the candidate, let alone the MP for Chatham and Aylesford, but it was clear that the fears of Wouldham village that it would become a victim of rat running to the bridge were dismissed and now the safety of residents is at risk.

Residents were reassured that the road modelling had been done and that it was believed that vehicles would go the long way round both in distance and time to get to the bridge, but the village is under siege. The volume and speed of vehicles travelling along the main road to get to the bridge creates a real fear, which I share, that it is only a matter of time until there is an accident. I have worked hard behind the scenes to try to alleviate the problem, and now are we beginning to make some small steps of progress, but the matter would not have got to this point if we had a better system of predictive modelling. Frankly, I think I could have done better modelling on my two-year-old’s car mat.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Thirteen more Back Benchers wish to speak, of which I know the hon. Gentleman will sensitively take account. I call Alan Brown.

8.50 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I commend her for her principled stand last week on fixed odds betting terminals. I wish her all the best for the future.

This debate, while quite clearly on a serious subject, is a big indicator of the moribund nature of the Government at present. We are having a general debate in the main Chamber, when it could truthfully have been held in Westminster Hall. Indeed, there was a Westminster Hall debate on this very topic just two weeks ago and there is a forthcoming Backbench Business debate.

The key issues raised two weeks ago are going to resurface tonight, so it would be good if the Minister summing up could actually address these matters properly and say what the Government are doing about them. For example, we still take an eye test by reading a number plate from 20 metres. That test was introduced in 1937. Surely we can modernise that? Drivers should have their eyesight tested more regularly. My eyesight has changed as I have got older. I now have to wear reading glasses, unfortunately. It is clear that that happens to many people, so why are drivers not required to get their eyesight tested more regularly? The Scottish Government still provide free eye tests, so that would not be an enormous burden on people. Perhaps the United Kingdom Government could look at doing that in terms of general health and wellbeing.

If the Tory Government are really serious about road safety, surely they will follow the lead of the Scottish National party Government and reduce the drink-driving limit. In Scotland, it has been reduced from allowable limits of 80 mg per 100 ml of blood to just 50 mg per 100 ml. That measure was initially met with scepticism by Opposition politicians. At the time, Tory MSPs were telling us that it would result in the police hounding wee old women and grannies who were just having a couple of gin and tonics, while real hardcore criminals would be getting off scot-free. But that is not what has happened. Since it was introduced, there has actually been a reduction in the number of drink-driving convictions. It is helping to bring about a change in culture, with people not wanting to risk drink-driving. It is time for the UK Government to have a rethink and to move away from having the joint highest drink-driving limits in Europe.

As the shadow Minister said, if the UK Government were serious about road safety they would have a target for reducing roadside fatalities. The Scottish Government have a target of a 40% reduction in road deaths between 2010 and 2020. The UK Government need to sign up to the UN target to halve the number of road deaths. The long-term trend in the numbers killed and injured from road accidents coincided with the introduction of drink-driving laws in 1966. There has been a general downward trend, except for a recent plateau. The obvious impact of the 1966 measure underlines the need to reconsider the current levels, especially as we now have better evidence of the impact of alcohol in the blood system.

Another way to tackle road safety is road upgrades to tackle accident blackspots and/or ways to reduce congestion and keep traffic moving more freely. I remind the House that another Union dividend that we in Scotland suffered for years was the lack of investment in Scotland’s road systems. It has taken the Scottish National party coming to power to really push this agenda. We now have the new M74 link from Glasgow, the M80 motorway, the £500 million M8, M74 and M73 upgrades, and, of course, the new Queensferry Crossing. Imagine—until recently, there was not even a continuous motorway connecting Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it not the case that before these Scottish Government investments, the last time that significant investment happened in the road infrastructure in Scotland, particularly in the highlands where I grew up, was as a result of European Union funding? Perhaps that is one reason why people have seen the benefits of the European Union in Scotland and why we voted so heavily to remain.

Alan Brown: I completely agree, and I am going to touch on that. Funding for the recent upgrades has been provided from the European Investment Bank, so we want to know what will replace that source because we have heard nothing from the Government about that. My hon. Friend mentioned the highlands, where many roads are still single-track with passing places, and these are sometimes lifeline roads. The trunk road from Fort William to Mallaig, the road to the isles, was only upgraded to a continuous two-lane carriageway in 2009; it was the last remaining single-track trunk road in the UK. Again, that was thanks in part to £3 million of European regional development fund money and European transitional fund assistance, so he is right. It is proof that if Scotland had not been able to access that money from the EU and had been reliant just on the Westminster purse strings, we would not have been getting the money for these vital road upgrades.

Going forward, at the Budget we heard about Barnett consequentials—well, living off Barnett scraps is not the way it should be. It is not how we can do long-term planning. It is a reactive measure to decisions that are made in England, for England, and we should not have to rely on these scraps from the table.
Other measures that can be introduced for road safety include such things as average speed cameras in a bid to change driver behaviour. The introduction of those on the A9 in Scotland was not popular and was cynically hijacked by Opposition politicians, yet since the cameras were introduced, the number of fatalities has been reduced by 40%. They have also been successfully introduced on the A77 and the A90, but the success of those on the A9 demonstrates not only how important these measures can be, but that politicians should act responsibly and not oppose for opposition's sake.

When analysing accident statistics, it is clear which three groups of road users are most vulnerable: pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. Too many short journeys are made by car. Statistically, these should be safer for the occupants of the car, so if we want to get more people walking and cycling, we need to make sure that people feel reassured that that can be done safely. The Scottish Government has announced a community links fund that will make £36 million available over the current financial year to develop walking and cycling paths, and this is certainly a welcome step forward. When we look at motorcyclists, we see that that group has around 6,000 casualties per 1 billion miles travelled and a fatality rate of just under 1 per 1 billion miles travelled. Pedal cyclists have similar statistics, yet car occupants have a casualty rate of 238 per 1 billion miles travelled and a fatality rate of 1.9 per 1 billion miles travelled. There is a huge disparity, which needs to be addressed.

Turning to targets, the Scottish Government have committed through “Scotland’s Road Safety Framework to 2020” to achieving safer road travel. This maps out intermediate targets, and I am pleased to say that we are well on our way to achieving these. In 2016, the Scottish Government’s road safety framework was awarded a prestigious Prince Michael international road safety award for outstanding achievements and strong collaboration with partners. I suggest that the UK considers the work that has been done.

Clearly, it is illegal to drive while impaired by drugs. Scottish Government plans to introduce new drug-driving limits will allow prosecutions when different drug types are detected above specified limits. This is simply intended to make it easier to hold drug-drivers to account, as there will be no requirement to prove that someone was driving in an impaired manner. The introduction of roadside testing means that this can be done without needing to look at whether somebody was driving in an impaired manner.

As other hon. Members have mentioned in interventions, another vulnerable cohort is horse riders. I live in a rural constituency with lots of minor country roads that are great for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, providing, of course, that vehicle drivers pay attention. I know myself to give respect and plenty of room to horse riders, but unfortunately not all car users do. Several of my constituents, including the chair of north Ayrshire riding club, have contacted me to express their concern that horse riders and carriages have not been included in the Department for Transport’s review of the Highway Code. I share their concern and that of the British Horse Society, which has highlighted the fact that, over a seven-year period, 40 horse riders and 237 horses have been killed as a consequence of road injuries. Why not include them in the review?

I also echo the call for the Minister to consider strengthening section 215 of the Highway Code to include the British Horse Society’s “dead slow” advice to drivers.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some good points on horses. Mine is an urban constituency, but we often get police horses going about the city, so it is important that different road users—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful, but I think the hon. Gentleman is approaching his peroration.

Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, as I am sure the whole House does—I am sure hon. Members listened carefully.

I finish with one reminder to the Minister about community transport and the proposed changes to section 19 and 22 permits. I have written to him on this subject. I have a local transport group still concerned that measures the Government are introducing will cost a lot of money. It provides a vital service transporting people and keeping them safe, and I urge him to consider that as well.
It is also important that we take local action. As the Government’s road safety statement notes, 98% of the road network in England comprises local roads, and local action needs to be encouraged and respected, but there is also an essential duty on the Department to get on with initiatives that spread good practice between local authorities. It is not just about speed either; there are a range of other road safety concerns. Across the country, partnerships like ours in Staffordshire are increasingly delivering a step change in the approach of local service providers. They are focusing on much more holistic and preventive methods, and communities are taking the lead.

Last Friday, The Sentinel—the local and proud newspaper of Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire—ran a front-page headline reporting that the shocking number of 877 drivers had been caught speeding by the police in just four months on the A500, the main arterial route through Stoke-on-Trent. The central motorway police group took over the policing of the road in the summer, following 26 fatal crashes in the preceding 10 years. The group is not picking on motorists who are just a mile or two per hour over the limit, as we might expect. Some motorists are travelling at between 60 mph and, on occasion, up to 90 mph on a road with a 50-mph limit. I am sure many Members agree that that is a shocking amount over the speed limit and that we need to get on top of the problem.

Thanks to the lobbying that we have been doing, Highways England traffic officers are regularly patrolling the busiest parts of the A500 and the A50 through Stoke-on-Trent. They are helping to ensure that, when incidents occur, they are managed as safely as possible and to reduce the number of further collisions and the knock-on disruption. I hope that the Minister will join me in commending the work that the police and highways officers are doing in Stoke-on-Trent and in commending The Sentinel for giving such prominence to this issue.

9.6 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Many Members on both sides of the House have already commented on the plight of horses and horse riders, which, I think, shows the power of the British horse lobby.

This debate is particularly important in the light of a recent report by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, which states that since 2010, there has been no significant reduction in the number of people killed on UK roads. That shows that the Government need to do more to improve the safety of our road network.

I want to speak specifically about the review of the Highway Code. I understand that the review, which was announced by the Minister last month, focuses on “how road users should behave in relation to cyclists and pedestrians”.

I welcome the review and any steps that are taken to make our roads safer for all, particularly those who are vulnerable on the roads, but I believe that there is an omission in the definition of vulnerable road users in the review, which was commissioned by the Minister. It is extremely important for cyclists and pedestrians to be protected on our roads, but I believe that horse riders should be included and categorised as vulnerable road users.

According to the British Horse Society, there are 2.7 million horse riders in the UK. This year, the society reported that since 2010 there had been more than 2,914 reports of road incidents involving horses, in which, sadly, 237 horses had died and 40 riders had lost their lives. Those statistics speak for themselves, and the safety of horse riders and their vulnerability on the roads should be taken very seriously.

Rule 215 of the Highway Code provides guidance for drivers in relation to horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles. It states:

“Be particularly careful of horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles especially when overtaking. Always pass wide and slowly.

Horse riders are often children, so take extra care and remember riders may ride in double file when escorting a young or inexperienced horse or rider.”

The current rules for riding a horse on the road, rules 49 to 55, state, among other things, that riders should keep to the left, keep both hands on the reins unless they are signalling, and keep both feet in the stirrups. The Department for Transport’s THINK! campaign also provides guidance for horse riders on the roads.

It is the responsibility of local authorities to erect traffic signs to alert drivers to accompanied horses or ponies and to position them where there are stable or where riders cross roads from one bridleway to another. However, since the debate was announced, a number of my constituents, including many equestrians and members of communities with a large population of horse riders, have expressed concern that signs are not being erected or are not being replaced when they fall down. They feel that the Government should do more to tackle the problem.

The many keen horse riders in my constituency have expressed dismay that they have been left out of the review of the Highway Code. Furthermore, many of the roads in my constituency are narrow country roads, which are particularly dangerous when shared by horse riders and vehicles. That is why campaigns such as the British Horse Society’s “Dead Slow” campaign, which aims to educate drivers on driving at a maximum of 15 mph when passing horse riders, to be patient and not sound their horn, to pass widely—at least a car’s width if possible—and to drive away slowly, are so important. Some 85% of incidents between horse riders and vehicles occur because a car driver is driving too close to a horse and its rider.

I therefore have a simple request for the Minister: for these reasons, I am asking that he considers widening the review of the Highway Code and understands that horse riders are vulnerable on our roads as well, not just cyclists and pedestrians. This review should include a strengthening of rule 215 of the Highway Code to include the four messages of the “Dead Slow” campaign, so that our roads can be safer and there can be more awareness and education of how to safely pass horse riders on our roads.

9.10 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). I also warmly welcome the work the Minister has done to improve safety for all road users, especially cyclists and pedestrians, and will use my time to touch on two local issues that are very important to my constituents in Redditch.
First, I pay tribute to an impressive lady called Lucy Harrison, who is a local representative of a charity called RoadPeace. She has made considerable efforts in fundraising and raising awareness of the impact of speeding after her brother was, tragically, killed in a road accident. He was a pedestrian hit by a reckless driver travelling at double the speed limit and was killed instantly. The accident was investigated, and a post-mortem was performed on Lucy’s brother within 48 hours, but during the trial the defence counsel requested a second post-mortem, and this did not take place for three months. That was over the Christmas period, and we can only imagine the agony and distress of her and her family during this time. The burial process was severely delayed, denying Lucy and her family a chance to say goodbye to her brother until a long time after his death.

The admirable charity RoadPeace is doing excellent work on this issue, and many second post-mortems take place as a result of road traffic accidents, so this is ultimately a matter of road safety.

There is widespread confusion regarding a defendant’s right to a second post-mortem. I recently met the excellent Justice Minister for Charnwood (Edward Argar) to discuss this matter and he assures me that new guidance is currently being drafted by the Chief Coroner. However, through the Minister’s work in improving road safety, the incidence of even first post-mortems can be avoided, so the pain and anguish of many families who have to experience loss as a result of road traffic accident can be reduced.

I believe more can be done by local councils, which leads me on to the second issue I would like to briefly mention. Katie Houghton. She runs a mental health awareness project called Midlands Messages of Hope, which simply seeks to reduce suicide. It is a superb local initiative, but I was saddened by Worcestershire County Council’s actions in tearing down more than 150 heartfelt messages of hope attached to the Muskett’s Way footbridge in Redditch. It is a place where people have been known to take their own lives, although the suicide rate is no higher in Redditch than elsewhere. The bridge spans a busy road, the Bromsgrove highway, and those messages are intended to make those who are on the edge think again, and they work alongside Samaritans signs that are also displayed. It is claimed that similar initiatives elsewhere save lives, so I implore the council to rethink its policy. Suicides can of course cause accidents, which makes that bridge and road in my constituency dangerous, and people perceive it as dangerous.

Road safety affects us all, both those who drive and those who do not. I am approached by constituents on a number of issues, but speeding is always at the top of the list, particularly in areas like Feckenham. People are always asking for more ways to tackle speeding. An Opposition Member mentioned speeding around schools as a result of road traffic accidents, so this is a matter of road safety.

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I must mention horses, because mine is a rural constituency. I support the very effective “Dead Slow” campaign to keep horses and their riders safe.

I should like to mention driving licences for dementia sufferers. I have written to the Minister about this before. I am the daughter of a dementia sufferer, and I had to go through the process of having my mother tested for driving and basically having to get her off the road because she was a danger to herself and others. That process was incredibly difficult and traumatic, especially as she lacked the awareness that she was an unsafe driver, which is itself the result of the disease of dementia. Please will the Minister look again at this policy area? Unfortunately, dementia is increasing, and I am sure that more and more of us will be touched by this sad state of affairs.

I am pleased that more investment has been made by the Minister, and I hope that this will help us to maintain our safe roads. We must keep the focus on that issue. We must decrease the amount of accidents that happen on our roads, reduce risks and protect vulnerable people, and we must always work to prevent the pain and grief that are caused by an unsafe road environment.

9.15 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). Road safety is an issue that I repeatedly raise in the House, and I welcome the opportunity to debate it in the Chamber this evening. We all know what a vital issue it is, and it affects many of our constituents, often tragically. In West Yorkshire, 815 people were killed or seriously injured in road traffic incidents last year. In my constituency, more children are killed or seriously injured on our roads than almost anywhere else in the country. I know that it is ambitious, but we should aim to eliminate road deaths and serious injuries entirely in the UK. Vision Zero seeks to do exactly that, and I urge the Government to look into that approach.

Clearly we will need a wide variety of tools in order to achieve that, and one crucial part is a tougher criminal justice approach. It was for this reason that I warmly welcomed the Government’s announcement in October 2017 that they would bring in longer sentences for drivers who killed through dangerous or careless driving, as well as the announcement of a new offence of causing serious injury through careless driving. I pay tribute to all those who campaigned for this change, including the road safety charity Brake, but we are now over a year on, and the Government have still not delivered on their commitment. In fact, we are no closer to those changes being made.

Ministers are now claiming that the changes will be incorporated into a review of cycle safety, but I have to say that that is completely unacceptable. It is right, of course, that the Government should look at the laws around cycling in order to make it safer for all road users, but it is not good enough that already-announced changes on sentencing are being rolled into the open-ended process. I really hope the Minister will listen and set out exactly when parliamentary time will be available to bring these changes into effect. The delay is adding to the suffering that families face when they lose loved ones.

Turning to another criminal justice issue, we must ensure that the exceptional hardship rule, which allows drivers to keep their licence even when they have reached 12 points, is not abused. Data from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency show that more than 200 people in Bradford alone successfully used that argument last year and escaped a ban. There are 11,000 drivers across Britain who still have their driving licences despite passing the 12-point limit. We are allowing unsafe drivers
to remain on our roads, and ultimately we are putting people at risk. Anyone who reaches 12 points should expect to be banned. Anything less makes a mockery of our road laws.

Of course, our laws are an effective deterrent only if they are properly enforced. For this we need well-resourced police forces that are able to patrol our roads, proactively tackle dangerous driving and bring those who break the law to justice. It is for this reason that the cuts to frontline policing caused by a reduction in funding from this Government are extremely worrying. On top of the 30% cuts in West Yorkshire since 2010, police forces across the country are facing an additional £165 million unexpected pensions bill, which will lead to even fewer officers. Prior to the Budget, I raised the issue of police pensions with the Prime Minister, and I wrote to her about it on 26 October. Unfortunately, I have not yet received a response. We cannot keep people safe on the cheap, and we cannot keep roads our safe without sufficient resources. If the Government are serious about making our roads safer, they must properly fund police budgets.

Finally, I would like to mention graduated driving licences, which allow new drivers to build up their driving skills and experience gradually, in well-defined, structured stages. There is clear evidence that a graduated licence system would make our roads safer, by reducing the number of young people involved in car accidents. Drivers aged 17 to 24 currently make up only 7% of drivers, but they represent nearly 20% of the people killed or seriously injured in car crashes. To conclude, I would like to return to that Vision Zero ambition to eliminate road deaths and serious injuries in the UK entirely. Ambitious, yes, but we owe it to the families who have lost loved ones to do everything we can to reduce deaths and make our roads safer for all.

9.19 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), and I want to make four points in this important debate on road safety. First, on vehicle safety standards, it is great news that the past decade has seen a 39% drop in road fatalities, but that is not just down to luck. Some of that reduction is due to the fact that our vehicles are better designed for safety, which is partly thanks to decades of work between the UK and other EU countries on EU safety standards. As we leave the EU, we will be encouraged by other parts of the world, such as America, to adopt other standards, but there are reasons why standards sometimes diverge. For example, Europe has narrower roads, with more pedestrians, so we build bigger bumpers on our cars, but cars in America flip over more often due to how the highways are designed. We do not need their standards, and they would not want ours, so let us continue to work with Europe on the car safety standards that have introduced, for example, airbags, ABS systems and other more advanced safety measures.

Secondly, many Chelmsford cyclists have written to me asking me to raise awareness. Chelmsford is a high-growth area, and we need to encourage people to get out of their cars and on to alternative transport. East Anglia is quite flat, so people are happy to use cycles, but they need to feel safe. We are investing more in cycle paths, but Cycling UK also has important proposals to ensure that there is more in the Highway Code to prohibit pavement parking and to encourage more cycle training and the use of the “Dutch reach” whereby drivers have to look over their shoulder when opening the door.

Thirdly, we need to raise awareness of what to do when a police siren goes off when someone is driving. I spent a day and a night on call with the police over the summer, crossing my constituency six times at top speed with the blue lights flashing, which clearly scared many drivers. We need an awareness campaign about how to get off the road safely to allow emergency vehicles to pass.

My last point is about horse riders. I am told that Essex has the highest level of horse ownership in the country, but my constituency is almost entirely urban. If one goes on that amazing source of data that is Facebook, one can see that 960 people in my constituency like tennis—like you, Mr Speaker—1,800 like hockey, but 3,800 like horse riding, and they are mostly women. Women are nine times more likely to ride horses—it is the top outdoor pursuit for women. People on horses have a right to be on the road, and riders often have to use a road, even if only for a short time, to get to a bridleway or another safe place.

I admit to having been an experienced rider in the past, but I got back on a horse this summer and found it absolutely terrifying. It was not just about the amount of traffic, but the lack of driver awareness of what they need to do if they see a horse. Drivers need to pass wide and pass slow, and they must remember that if two horses are riding side by side, that could be because there is an inexperienced rider or a young horse. Finally, please do not beep the horn—that really is spooky for horses. I have been concerned by stories of some drivers finding it fun to be unsafe when a horse is nearby. It is not fun; it is deeply dangerous, and 40 people and over 200 horses have lost their lives.

We need more driver awareness, and one solution could be to use the bit of time between a learner taking their multiple-choice theory test at the test centre and getting the results. All those new learner drivers need to wait for their results, and the British Horse Society has some fantastic virtual reality headsets that will give those new learners a quick experience of what it is like to be on a horse when a car goes past too fast. Maybe we could use that little bit of time to do just a little more driver awareness.

9.24 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I am grateful to various organisations for their briefings on this evening’s debate, including PACTS, Brake, Cycling UK, the Road Safety Foundation, Guide Dogs, Ageas and the Towards Zero Foundation. I have two main comments, one about language and one about why road safety is a constituency issue, as well as a national and international one.

First, we as politicians know that language is crucial, which is why we should, and the emergency services do, now speak of “road traffic crashes” and not “road traffic accidents.” We should know now, if we did not know before, that most incidents, and the consequent statistics of people killed or seriously injured, could have been avoided if humans had made positive decisions.
They are not accidents; they are avoidable tragedies. If drivers had only observed the rules on speed, drink, drugs, mobile phone usage, seatbelts and the rest, those lives could have been spared.

I am also struck that Brake describes the failure to cut the number of deaths and serious injuries in recent years as figures that have “stagnated”. Many commentators, including me and the Minister, have used the word “plateau” but, on reflection, that suggests high ground and achievement. “Stagnated”, however, suggests something entirely different, negative and certainly not nice.

On the question of targets, as raised by a number of colleagues, in May the Department for Transport published an independent capacity review on road safety by Systra. Among its recommendations were:

“Set interim quantitative targets to 2030 to reduce the numbers of deaths and serious injuries”.

And:

“Set measurable interim targets to 2030 to reduce the numbers of deaths and serious injuries with supporting road safety performance objectives, as proposed for the national framework.”

As well as this independent review, deaths and serious injuries as a result of road traffic crashes have been recognised by the United Nations and the World Health Organisation as an international crisis—1.25 million dead and 20 million seriously injured every year—and they are now subject to two sustainable development goals, SDGs 3.6 and 11.2 recommend a target of halving the number of people killed or seriously injured by 2030. The Government signed up to those goals and published the Systra recommendations, so why will they not formally endorse targets as part of the weaponry to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries?

The UK fire service has a proud record in international aid, including providing second-hand fire engines and other equipment, unused kit from brigades and supply chains, and training and advice. That has been happening for decades, and not just following disasters. The charity Fire Aid, which I chair, especially provides pillar 5 post-crash response. It is hugely frustrating that UK aid from the Department for International Development has billions of taxpayers’ pounds to distribute but cannot support small charities like Fire Aid, which is saving lives in 40 countries around the world and delivering soft diplomacy for UK plc.

I said at the beginning of my contribution that this is as much a local issue as a national or international one. In Poplar and Limehouse 190 people were killed or seriously injured between 2011 and 2016. Twenty-two were under the age of 16, and 78 were between 16 and 29. RTCs are the biggest killer of our young people nationally.

Investment in road safety not only saves lives but makes economic sense. Each year road crashes cost UK plc £35 billion, or 2% of our GDP. For every £1 invested, £4.40 of monetary value is created. This not only makes economic sense; it makes human sense, too.

Road safety should not be a party political issue. The Minister is held in high regard as a man of integrity. There is an opportunity here for him to reset our efforts, to give leadership and provide ambition and to reduce our KSI—killed or seriously injured—statistics. I look forward to him delivering, but I think he needs targets in his campaign.
In conclusion, for all that progress has been made over the years on a number of fronts, there is a simple, sad reality: too many innocent people still die on our roads. That is why I hope that the Minister says in responding to this debate that the Government will act on tougher penalties for those who kill with a car and that they are prepared seriously to examine in future having such an eyesight test, so that never again is a precious little three-year-old girl taken from her grieving parents.

9.33 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Tonight I will talk about Bobby Colleran and Livia Galli-Atkinson. Bobby Colleran was a bright, fun-loving boy. As his mum Joanne put it, he was “cheeky but charming”. The middle child, he adored his brothers. On 24 October 2014, while Bobby was walking home from Blackmoor Park Infant School with his mum, he was knocked down and killed. He was six years old. The incident sent shockwaves around my constituency and Liverpool as a whole. The coroner said “when a six year old dies in these circumstances, it affects the whole city”.

In the aftermath of that tragedy, the Bobby Colleran Trust was created to encourage and promote better road safety awareness for children, parents and schools. One of the ways they have done that is by encouraging schools to introduce “Bobby zones”, which are designed to slow down traffic, prevent the unnecessary build-up of vehicles and ensure a maximum speed of 20 mph. If people drive around Liverpool, they will see a “Slow down for Bobby” banner outside pretty much every primary school. I want to keep that legacy going by making sure that the challenge is taken up not only across Merseyside but throughout the country. I urge the Minister to make that happen.

When I was the MP for Enfield, Southgate, a similar incident happened in my then constituency. Livia Galli-Atkinson was just 16 when she was killed on her way to ballet on 12 January 1998. A driver had mounted the pavement behind her. Last Tuesday would have been her 36th birthday. Out of that tragedy arose the annual Livia awards. The Livia award for professionalism and service to justice is an annual award given to a Metropolitan police officer in the traffic operational command unit who is judged to have provided the most meritorious service. I have had the privilege of chairs the Livia awards since its inception and of seeing some of the exemplary professional commitment shown by police officers in often harrowing circumstances. Next week will be the 20th anniversary of the award and all colleagues are welcome to attend the annual awards ceremony at 7 pm next Monday.

Let us learn the lessons from the families of Bobby and Livia. I pay tribute to my good friends, Bobby’s parents Joanne and David, and Livia’s parents Guilietta and George, who have gone above and beyond to ensure that no other child is hurt or dies on our roads. I pay tribute to them as I pay tribute to the fantastic campaigning organisations such as Brake and RoadPeace, which have made such a big difference. As we have heard, though, in recent years the decline in the numbers of deaths on our roads has stagnated. Indeed, last year the number of deaths on our roads was at its highest since 2011. We must do better. Targets are not a panacea, but they demonstrate a determination. I urge the Minister to look into the reintroduction of national casualty targets as part of the Government’s strategy.

Let me finish by saying something about the global challenge. Road casualties are a major killer, particularly in some of the world’s poorest countries. The death or injury of a family member can further entrench poverty, leaving a family without a breadwinner or without the capacity to work. That is part of the reason why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said, the sustainable development goals include targets to cut the numbers killed and seriously injured on the roads. The 2015 United Nations global goals include SDG 3.6, which is to halve the number of deaths and serious injuries on the world’s roads by 2020. That is in two years’ time. This has been declared the decade of action for road safety.

As part of our inquiry into the global goals, the International Development Committee found “a worrying lack of engagement in the SDGs across Government.” Next year, the United Kingdom will submit itself to the United Nations for a voluntary national review of progress on the goals. Will the Minister tell us how the Department for Transport will take part in that review? I urge the Department to make road safety a priority for its participation in the national voluntary national review, and I urge the Minister to work on road safety with his colleagues in the Department for International Development, because if we are to achieve the goals, Departments working together will have the biggest impact.

Around the world, 3,500 people die on the roads every day. Every single death or injury is one too many. Let us reaffirm our responsibility to do all we can to achieve the vision of zero deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

9.38 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby. Like him and my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), I wish to talk about deaths and serious injuries caused by dangerous drivers.

Last year, 191 people were convicted of causing death by dangerous driving, yet the average prison sentence given to the perpetrators of those crimes was just 29 months, with a similar period of time to be spent released on licence. We are all aware that, in response to pressure and campaigning from bereaved families and the road safety charity Brake and its “Roads to Justice” campaign, the Government finally agreed back in December 2016 to hold a consultation on sentencing for those who cause death by dangerous driving. That consultation ran until February 2017 and received more than 9,000 responses.

Last October, the Government finally announced that, as a result of the consultation, they were introducing tougher sentences, including the possibility of life sentences to replace the current maximum sentence of 14 years. When that was announced more than a year ago, there was much relief among campaigners and bereaved families that, at last, the Government were taking action to ensure that other families would not have to suffer the
same injustices. Not only were they sentenced to a lifetime of grief at the loss of a loved one, but they suffered the injustice of seeing their loved one’s killer receive a prison sentence of just a few years.

Ian and Dawn Brown-Lartey in my constituency of Heywood and Middleton had a 25-year-old son, Joseph, who was killed by a 19-year-old driving an uninsured unlicensed hired Audi at 80 miles an hour in a 30-mile an hour zone, running through a red light and smashing into Joseph’s car, killing him outright. The impact was so great that Joseph’s car was split in two. His grieving parents were determined that no other family should have to suffer as they had done and they, supported by award-winning campaigning journalist Michelle Livesey, launched their campaign “Justice for Joseph”, handing in a petition at 10 Downing Street signed by thousands of people.

The day before the horrific crash, Joseph’s killer posted a photo of his dashboard on social media, showing the speedometer at 142 miles an hour on the M62 motorway, and boasted of driving from Leeds to Rochdale in just 11 minutes. That is a distance of 33 miles, which means that he must have been travelling at an average speed of a staggering 180 miles an hour. He was imprisoned for six years in May 2015, but has since been released on licence after serving half his sentence. Joseph’s father said:

“It is absolutely frustrating, especially when you’re driving on the streets every day and you can see what’s going on. There is simply no deterrent. If the Government are not putting in place a deterrent, they are saying to people it’s OK to get behind the wheel and kill somebody.”

Sadly, as we have heard, the Brown-Larteyes are not the only family to suffer in this way. Because of my work with the Justice for Joseph campaign I have met so many bereaved families. They include the family of Bryony Hollands, who was killed while walking with her boyfriend by a driver who was three times over the limit. She had been left with permanent deafness in one ear. Both were talented music students.

Bryony’s family lives in the Prime Minister’s constituency of Maidenhead, where the Conservative-controlled Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council wrote to the Justice Secretary in June this year to urge him to bring forward the promised legislation. Bryony’s father, Mark, is deeply disappointed by the Government’s inaction. He said that the slow progress in implementing changes to the law “sends out the message that it is not that important.”

Bryony’s killer was sentenced to just eight years in 2015 and is expected to be released on licence next year, while her family serve a life sentence of grief for their daughter, killed at just 19 years old.

After the horrific deaths of two-year-old Caspar and six-year-old Corey Platt-May at the hands of a driver high on cocaine in February of this year, I and more than 70 other MPs wrote to the Justice Secretary asking again when the Government’s decision to introduce life sentences for death by dangerous driving was to be brought into legislation. Again the response we received was, “When parliamentary time allows”. Well, when will that time be? This should be an easy change to implement. Why do this Government continue to drag their feet over this issue, which is so important to safety on our roads?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A four-minute limit applies now.

9.43 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There are two issues that I wish to raise in this debate. The first one relates to an issue that I have previously raised with the Minister, which is that of road poles. This is about how we can minimise the casualties in the collisions on our roads. The second one is about how we can make roads in the far south-west, particularly in Devon, safer. The Road Safety Foundation has declared that half of all Britain’s road deaths take place on just 10% of the road network. One of those roads runs through the constituency that I represent. The stretch of the A38 that goes through Devon is one of the most dangerous roads in our county. Members who have spoken in road safety debates in Westminster Hall will know that this issue is close to my heart, because I have spoken particularly about a constituent of mine called Trevor Gorman, whose son—also called Trevor—was killed in a road collision on the A38 last June, along with his friends Marshall and Zachary. Their van collided with a road traffic signpost and all three men were killed instantly. The post that they collided with was made of steel that was not designed to crumple, collapse on impact or absorb shock. Hard steel posts are common on nearly all major roads, with smaller B roads through to the motorway network. Experts at the inquest stated that the pole met requirements when it was erected in the 1990s, but it has not been replaced or upgraded since.

The accident that took the lives of those three men could have been avoided if the steel signpost in an accident blackspot had been upgraded to a frangible pole. Members will have seen frangible poles on the road network. They are lattice-shaped poles that are designed to absorb impact, so they do not have a hard surface against the impact. Ever since his son’s death, Mr Gorman has been campaigning tirelessly to improve road safety standards, swapping hard steel poles for frangible ones. This may sound like a small technical detail, but it can save lives. Mr Gorman wants to ensure that no family has to suffer the grief that he and his family have been through after the loss of his son and his son’s two friends, and to ensure that they have not died in vain; his strength really is inspiring.

Plymouth City Council, particularly Councillor Mark Coker, has been galvanising support for replacing hard steel poles with frangible poles in the accident blackspots in our city, but this is an initiative that every single local authority could be doing. I would like the Minister to look at whether support can be given to local authorities where accident blackspots exist in order to replace hard steel poles with frangible ones. This will save lives. We will not be able to affect the stagnation in the number of road deaths with one silver bullet, as we will need lots of different measures, such as those mentioned in this debate, but replacing hard steel poles would be one small effort. The work that Councillor Coker has been doing in Plymouth has the support of Public Health England, and Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service.

[Liz McInnes]
As well as poles, we need to look at the other items on the roadsides that are not frangible. I am talking about trees in particular. The London plane tree may have been instrumental in saving air quality in the Victorian era and the silver birch may be a similar saviour for dealing with nanoparticles and microparticles in the 21st century, but the trees along our roadsides are not frangible, and many people die or are seriously injured in collisions with trees. We need a solution to address the hard surfaces that people can collide with, particularly on the roads where such accidents really happen, and the A38 in Devon is one of those roads. Extending the M5 from Exeter to the Tamar bridge will make a substantial difference to safety, because motorways are the safest roads on our network. The Minister has bids from Devon County Council and Plymouth City Council to look at that. I would be grateful if he lent his support not only to the frangible road pole campaign, but to the plans to extend the M5.

Mr Speaker: The Minister will be called to give a two-minute wind-up at no later than 9.58 pm. Members can do the arithmetic for themselves; I encourage them to be considerate of one another.

9.48 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am a cyclist myself. In fact, I am probably one of the few Members who cycle to this place on an almost daily basis, so I could talk about cyclists and road safety at length, but tonight I will quickly reiterate the points made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who is about to leave the Chamber. The beauty of being one of the last speakers is that one can reinforce a particular message.

I ask the Government further to improve road safety for pedestrians, cyclists, bikers and vehicle drivers with one critical measure: proper eye-testing. At the moment, there are no robust regulations to ensure that vehicle drivers can actually see. UK regulations for drivers’ eyesight are among the weakest in Europe, relying on self-regulation and self-reporting. UK drivers can pass their driving test without having a full examination to prove that their eyes are roadworthy, and can then drive for the rest of their lives unpoliced. All we have in the UK is a basic vision test by a non-medically qualified driving test centre. The test is to read a number plate at a distance of 20 metres.

It ignores other essentials such as peripheral vision, which is also essential for safety for cyclists. It means that there is no medical rigour to confirm that most drivers are visually fit to drive. It means that cyclists, pedestrians and motorists who have regular eye tests are sharing the road with people driving a tonne of metal who have never given their eyes an MOT. The campaign for proper eye-testing originated in my constituency. The Government require vehicles to pass an annual MOT test, and it is illegal to drive after drinking or taking drugs, but there is an obvious gap in the law that allows drivers to drive with poor eyesight.

This is not a technical question. The World Health Organisation says that poor eyesight is a key risk factor in road crashes. Approximately 3,000 casualties in the UK can be attributed to drivers having poor vision. Poor vision costs lives. It also costs money—an estimated £33 million a year. While some drivers have their driving licence revoked or refused because of poor vision, there is no structured approach, and lives are being lost as a result. People can lose 40% of their vision before they notice a problem. There is no requirement for good eyesight and acceptable peripheral vision. Good vision should be a requirement to drive: road safety demands it. Current procedures lack medical rigour, increasing the potential for injury or death.

The Driving Blind campaign calls for a change in legislation to require drivers to be tested by an optician before their driving test and at every subsequent licence renewal application. It also calls for new drivers to be vision-tested, including for peripheral vision, and certified by an optician, with follow-up tests every decade up to the age of 70 and then every three years thereafter. If we can reduce the number of people driving blind on our roads, we will improve road safety. I look forward to the Government’s response.

9.51 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): When I am contacted by my constituents about this subject, the section of road that comes up more than any other is the M56 motorway between junctions 12 and 14. It is an area blighted by collisions, causing serious delays in the whole area as well as significant impacts on those involved. After a concerted campaign for improvements alongside my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), we were pleased to hear that improvements will now be considered.

I appreciate that it is by no means certain that something will happen, and that includes the smart motorway that we want. However, I urge Ministers to look very closely at this, and then, if a decision is made to proceed, to consider very carefully how the improvements are delivered, because I have had a number of complaints about smart motorways, particularly regarding the works on the M6. Virtually the whole of the stretch of road from Cheshire to Birmingham is coned off, with speed limits, yet whenever I go on it, there appear to be few or no workmen there. This seems to be an incredibly inefficient way of improving the network. Is it reasonable to have 20 miles of motorway coned off for years at a time? Why cannot the work be done on a small section and then moved along? I am not harking back to the glory days of the cones hotline, but I do wonder if anyone is monitoring what is going on there. The suspicion is that the contracts—or conetracts—that were agreed are putting their cost above the long delays and economic impact caused. There is also concern about the safety of some of the night-time closures and diversions.

Closer to home, I am also regularly contacted about the A540 in Neston. It is a very busy road. The number of serious incidents each year is in double figures, and there are fatalities on the road in most years. I pay tribute to Pauline Fielding, who has been campaigning for improvements on the road for almost 25 years, after her son Andrew tragically lost his life. Thanks to the efforts of Pauline and other local campaigners, the speed limit was reduced to 40 mph. Some improvements were made to the junction with Raby Park Road, which—I have to declare an interest—I sometimes drive through when I take my children to school. However, it is clear that much more significant improvements are required not just on this part of the road but the whole length of it. Unfortunately, these improvements are beyond the means of the local authority. Mrs Fielding and many
others believe that installing traffic lights is the only way to improve safety along there, but that will take up all the local authority’s capital budget, as well as having a knock-on effect on the rest of the road, including at the junction with Hinderton Road, the next one along, where there are also safety concerns.

Schemes like this fall into a category that deserves a far greater level of attention. They are too large for local authorities to act alone but too small to be considered under the remit of Highways England or the road investment strategy. Often, as with the A540, these sections of road can straddle the boundaries between local authorities and local enterprise partnerships, exacerbating the difficulty in bringing forward a viable scheme.

The Safer Roads fund is a welcome start in tackling these sorts of issues. However, I am concerned that only £100 million of the £175 million originally budgeted has so far been allocated. If the Minister still has any of that £75 million left, burning a hole in his pocket, and he wants to spend it on the A540, he will be welcomed with open arms if he comes to Neston.

9.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is a massive issue. With the Christmas season, Christmas parties and the rush of the season approaching, it is imperative that the message is reinforced that the holiday spirit is wonderful, but driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is never acceptable at any time of the year, and certainly not at Christmas time.

Two hundred people are still killed in drink-drive accidents every year. Even after 30 years of drink-drive education and enforcement, more than 70,000 people are still caught drink-driving annually. Often it is an innocent person who suffers, not the driver who is over the drink-drive limit. In 2016, 100 pedestrians were killed or injured by drink-drivers, as were 330 car passengers and 40 children. In 2016, almost half a million roadside breath tests took place, and some 60,000 drivers or riders failed or refused to take the test. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the maximum blood alcohol limit is 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood, but in Scotland that has been lowered to 50 mg.

I remind the Minister that the Government commissioned Sir Peter North to conduct a review of drink and drug driving law in 2010. In that review, evidence was heard that drivers with a blood alcohol level of between 50 mg and 80 mg are two to two and a half times more likely to be involved in an accident than drivers with no alcohol, and up to six times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash. We must be ever mindful of those figures.

In 2000, the Government’s road safety strategy estimated that reducing the limit to 50 mg would save 50 lives and prevent some 250 injuries each year. When that was reviewed, it was estimated that it could save 65 lives and prevent 230 injuries each year. I ask the Minister to give further consideration to the North review, which concluded that a reduction to 50 mg would “undoubtedly save a significant number of lives.”

It estimated at the time that 168 lives could be saved and 16,000 injuries prevented annually, and after six years, some 303 lives annually could be saved.

Finally, I want to refer to the Highway Code as it pertains to the safety of horse riders. If my understanding of the figures is correct, my constituency has the largest number of people involved in the horse industry and sector in Northern Ireland. A review is to be undertaken into this issue, but could the Minister ensure that there is a mention of horses in that? I underline that case because of the 40 riders killed, 237 horses killed and almost 900 horses injured on our roads in the last seven years. Some 85% of road incidents involving horses are because drivers pass too close or too fast to them. In particular, I ask the Minister to look at strengthening section 215 of the Highway Code on horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles, to include the British Horse Society’s “dead slow” advice to drivers on how to pass horses safely. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments.

9.57 pm

Jesse Norman: This has been an interesting and lively debate. Many colleagues from across the House have had a chance to comment, and I want to respond to as many of them as I can.

I have mentioned the dreadful crash that took place on the M5 in 2011, and we have heard many examples this evening of dreadful road incidents. To recap, in response, the Government are taking vigorous action. We are improving roads infrastructure, looking at the training of new and novice drivers, taking action against the most dangerous driving behaviour, investigating collisions and targeting future activity at the highest-risk groups. In doing so, we are reliant on and very grateful for all the constructive and expert support that we get from key partners, from traffic police to local authority road officials.

Let me touch quickly on some of the many questions raised. The issue of targets is constantly raised with the Government, and this evening has been no exception. I repeat that some countries with great safety records have targets, and some do not. There is no necessary correlation, and it would not be right to hide behind targets when there are so many specific measures that we can potentially take. I will touch on some of them.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) was right to mention older users, and they are included in our two-year plan. He mentioned the Safer Roads fund and asked why it has not been spread. We received 50 applications, and we funded 50 applications.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) correctly reflected on the importance of thinking of recovery operators. We very much bear them in mind, and I saw them recently at the RAC.

Horse riders are vulnerable road users—there is no doubt about that, and there never has been—and they have been included in the work we are doing. We are interested in the evidence coming from Scotland on lower alcohol limits. I salute my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for the work done by The Sentinel newspaper in his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered road safety.
**Business without Debate**

**SITTING IN WESTMINSTER HALL**

(6 NOVEMBER)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(1)(b), the sitting in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 6 November shall be suspended from 11.30am till 3.15pm and may then continue for up to 3 hours.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

**STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS**

(6 NOVEMBER)

Ordered,

That Derek Twigg be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Jessica Morden be added.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

**REGULATORY REFORM**

Ordered,

That Jeremy Quin be discharged from the Regulatory Reform Committee and Ben Bradley be added.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

**TRANSPORT**

Ordered,

That Iain Stewart be discharged from the Transport Committee and Robert Courts be added.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

**PETITION**

Illegal Encampments in Berkshire

10.1 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It has been a particularly difficult summer for many of the residents of West Berkshire, who have been subjected to illegal Traveller encampments close to where they live—mainly on public land, but in every sense in circumstances that have brought great difficulty to them and their neighbours. I therefore submit a petition to the House on behalf of 244 signatories, with a further 366 on my website, as well as on behalf of the many people across neighbouring constituencies who have suffered from the over 50 illegal encampments we have had in West Berkshire this summer.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Berkshire,

Declares that they have suffered an intolerable imposition from an increasing number of unauthorised encampments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce legislation to make trespass a criminal offence, and strengthen the powers used by the police to deal with illegal encampments, in addition to those already available under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002285]

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**Healthcare in Essex**

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Robert Halfon.

10.3 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your continued support, as my constituency neighbour, in our campaign for a new healthcare campus in Harlow. You could not have done more to support me, and I am very glad to see you here this evening.

Today, I would like to update the House on the desperate need for a new hospital in Harlow that is fit for the demands of the 21st century. This is now my third debate on the need for a long-term solution to the healthcare crisis in west Essex, and I cannot stress enough the urgency of the situation. The present site, the Princess Alexandra Hospital, serves over 350,000 people and is no longer able to cope under the pressure of an influx of patients. The new healthcare campus, as proposed by the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust, would encompass accident and emergency services, general practitioner provision, social care, physiotherapy and a new ambulance hub in state-of-the-art, purpose-built facilities.

I thank those Members, some of whom are in the Chamber this evening, who have been so instrumental in the progress of this campaign. In May, they joined me in signing a letter to the former Health Secretary to urge the Government to support the capital funding bid in place for a new hospital. They included my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), my right hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), my hon. Friends the Members for Braintree (James Cleverly) and for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who is present and a big supporter of our new hospital proposal for Harlow.

From this, I have gone on to secure a visit to the Princess Alexandra Hospital from the new Health Secretary, who has heard the case loud and clear, and I look forward to welcoming him to Harlow to discuss the future of our healthcare provision in Essex.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan)—Telford is also a new town—so accurately put it in my first debate on the subject in October 2017, hospitals

“are the centre of our communities and cement our identity.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 347WH.]

The unwavering support that I have received for a new health campus, both in Parliament and locally, is a testament to its importance, not just to Harlow, but to the wider population of Essex and Hertfordshire.

In March, we received the wonderful news from the Care Quality Commission that the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust had been brought out of special measures—news on which the former Health Secretary, echoing the sentiments of the Prime Minister, congratulated
the hospital in a special video message on Twitter. The chief inspector at the CQC noted that the driving force behind the 18-month turnaround was “the dedicated staff” and “outstanding leadership” team, headed by chief executive Lance McCarthy. I do not believe that enough credit can be given to the staff at the hospital.

I recently visited the Williams day unit, a specialist cancer treatment centre at Princess Alexandra Hospital, for a Macmillan coffee morning. I was struck by the staff’s compassion for their patients and their determination to ensure that, at possibly the most difficult time in a person’s life, the hospital is a happy, welcoming place to come to, to get better and to leave feeling more positive than when they came in.

From my numerous visits to the hospital, in my capacity as an MP and as a patient and visitor, I defy anyone to find better staff than at Princess Alexandra Hospital. In spite of a working environment that is literally falling down around them, thanks to the efforts of every single staff member, from the porters, cleaners and kitchen staff to the nurses, midwives and consultants, 64% of the services are on their way to a “good” or “outstanding” rating.

Special credit must be paid to the maternity unit, which the CQC deemed “outstanding” overall. The team delivers more than 4,200 babies a year, yet their rate of stillbirths is 10% lower than the national average. For those reasons, the maternity department was recently selected to feature in an ongoing documentary with TV personality and presenter of “The Voice”, Emma Willis. I encourage hon. Members to watch that programme on Monday evenings to see for themselves just how dedicated and caring the staff are.

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

Robert Halfon: I will always give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: I have always supported the right hon. Gentleman’s contributions in the Chamber since we both came to the House together in 2010. He has clearly outlined the case for healthcare in his constituency. The Government have set aside an ambitious £28.5 billion for healthcare. Does he hope to have some of that money for his constituency? Does he also feel that there needs to be a reduction in red tape so that professionals can use their medical expertise to their full ability? This is about the money, but it is also about reducing the red tape.

Robert Halfon: I hope that my hon. Friend the Health Minister knows that a new hospital in Harlow is supported not just in Essex and Hertfordshire, but in Northern Ireland. This is the second debate on the subject that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has attended, and of course I agree with him.

The maternity department serves as the perfect example of how investment can transform patient care under the successful staffing that is already in place, as the labour ward benefits from new refurbished delivery rooms and a second maternity theatre. However, it also sheds light on the fact that refurbishment is not a fix-all solution. Therefore, does the Minister agree that, were the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust to receive the capital funding that it so desperately needs to build a state-of-the-art health campus, that would allow every department to flourish, as the maternity ward has already done?

As I have touched upon before, the dilapidation of the estate is hindering any further progress. A 2013 survey rated 56% of the hospital’s estate as unacceptable or below for its quality and physical condition. That was five years ago now and the situation is only deteriorating. With long-term under-investment, we are continuing to put the capability of the hospital to care for those in need at serious risk—just read the reports of raw sewage and rainwater flowing into the operating theatres. Given that time is of the essence, does the Minister recognise the importance of the release of capital funding to the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust this autumn?

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making such a powerful case. I would like to add my support, because all across Essex we need to have world-class hospitals. Does he agree that the new facility in Chelmsford, our first ever Essex medical school, will train the doctors of the future and provide the staff to work in his fantastic new hospital when it arrives?

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for coming here this evening. Her presence is another example to the Minister of how the new hospital in Harlow is supported across Essex. She is a brilliant constituency MP, and she is absolutely right about the staff she mentions in her part of our national health service.

To add insult to injury, the layout of the hospital is convoluted and nonsensical. That is evident to any patients seeking urgent care or any visitor looking to find their loved one. As the former Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), noted in my first debate in July 2017, the hospital suffers from “sub-optimal clinical adjacencies” due to the development of temporary structures. To those who suggest that refurbishment would be a more suitable and less costly solution, I cannot emphasise enough that that is not looking to the long term. The tangled layout of the current hospital, comprising add-on structures and sporadic urgent care, is a direct consequence of short-term financial fixes; my case in point that an Elastoplast solution will no longer stick.

Aside from the natural degradation of the estate over time, the hospital is now forced to deal with new pressures stemming from a rising population and the downgrading of other local healthcare facilities, including Chase Farm Hospital and the Queen Elizabeth II. Cracks are already evident in the accident and emergency department. Back in 1966, the A&E unit was designed for approximately 60,000 attendances per year. It is currently seeing 68% more than that, with 200 to 300 attendances per day. That figure is 10% higher than the national average and, against its size, places the hospital as the busiest A&E department in England.

In the latest board meeting of directors in October 2018, it was suggested that July 2018 was “the busiest ever month...at the Trust” for the A&E, “with attendances as high as 9,400”
in that single month. The influx of patients is only set to continue, with the relocation of Public Health England to Harlow hosting as many as 2,750 workers based at the site, as well as the Gilston Green Town development, providing 8,500 new homes in Harlow, and the near-completion of Junction 7A on the M11. Does the Minister acknowledge that to support the trust in meeting the 95% four-hour access target, the Government must do all they can to alleviate such pressure? Does he further recognise that the new, expanded health campus would alleviate this immediate pressure, but also future-proof the hospital, accounting for further population growth?

I am grateful for the Government’s capital investment to realise Harlow’s strategic economic and housing plans, but I ask for the same treatment for our comprehensive healthcare plan. It is not the infrastructure alone that is a burden on the staff. Staff shortages—the hospital frequently operates at an 11% vacancy rate—stem from widespread difficulties in recruiting and retaining well-qualified employees. That is due in particular to Harlow’s proximity to London. According to the leadership team at the hospital, the opportunity for career development, or lack thereof, is a much more significant sticking point for potential recruits.

State-of-the-art facilities and a quality healthcare campus would at least offer the hospital the chance to enter the same race. The new campus and medical training facilities would allow the hospital both to attract and retain the very best staff. It would become an apprenticeships and skills centre, offering high-class, nursing degree apprenticeships.

The spiralling health crisis makes the urgency of the hospital campus all the more pressing. According to the Essex local authority portrait, Harlow has the highest rate of premature deaths attributed to cardiovascular diseases and the third highest rate of diabetes in the country. Hospital staff also deal with high rates of substance misuse, and 66.1% of adults are classed as overweight, which is higher than the national average. Harlow has the largest proportion of 10 and 11-year-olds classed as overweight or obese in the country, at 36.2%. There are many reasons why west Essex should have a health campus fit for the 21st century, but these figures clearly evidence a need.

At the former Secretary of State’s recommendation, the trust put forward its strategic outline case—SOC—in August 2017. The board, clinical commissioning group and local authority partners, together with KPMG, concluded that the health campus model would be “the most affordable solution for the local system” and “would deliver the most benefit to our population”.

Since my last debate in July 2018, the timescale for the development plans has changed and the plans are currently in the NHS and NHS Improvement assurance process. The trust is working closely with commissioners, patients and the public to develop a pre-consultation business case and refresh its SOC.

In my debate in October 2017, the former Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, so helpfully highlighted: “The extent to which there is capital available to support very significant projects will depend on how much is made available by the Treasury.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 352WH.]

As was also noted in the debate, “upgrading services on this important site will be a priority for a Conservative Government.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 347WH.]

I take this opportunity to thank the Government for the announcement of £20.5 billion additional annual funding for the NHS, and I ask, in the light of this spending and the end of austerity, as the Prime Minister and the Chancellor said, is this not the most apt time to provide the Princess Alexandra Hospital with the bright future that it is determined to have?

My hon. Friend the Minister has gone out of his way to meet me and the chief executive of the hospital trust and to listen to his concerns and mine, and I cannot say how appreciative I am of that. As a key area of contention for my residents, I would be grateful to receive an update on the progress of this funding and a timescale for the economic investment plans. The issues that the hospital faces today are preventable, but all of them are beyond the control of the hard-working staff, patients and visitors. This is on the Government to act. This is on the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care to see reason and allocate the necessary funding for a new healthcare campus in west Essex.

10.18 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing the debate and on securing an early visit from the Secretary of State. As the whole House knows, he is passionate about the future of the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow and he has raised this issue assiduously in a number of debates and interventions in the House. As he referred to, we had a very productive meeting with the hospital chief executive in June, where we discussed a range of issues, including the workforce and services offered at the hospital. That is in addition to an earlier Adjournment debate, as well as an Adjournment debate with my predecessor a year ago and exchanges at Health questions. On behalf of his constituents, he has brought these issues to the attention of the House extremely effectively.

I also place on record that I very much recognise that these issues are extremely important to Epping Forest as well, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know how assiduously you have campaigned on behalf of your constituents. Indeed, this is an issue that Members across Essex and Hertfordshire have spoken up on. That was reflected in previous debates and was reflected in the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). As we all recall, she was instrumental, as were other Essex MPs, including my right hon. Friend, in securing the new medical school, which, as she said, will help us to deliver the extra doctors to go with the buildings and capital spend, which we are discussing today.

As my right hon. Friend is aware, but for the benefit of the House, we have the sustainability and transformation fund as part of the Government’s commitment to upgrading the NHS estate. This investment will modernise and transform the NHS’s buildings and services, with the money going towards a range of programmes. This is part of the Government’s commitment to spending £3.9 billion on capital investment in buildings and facilities by 2022-23 and alongside the £20.5 billion a year extra that my right hon. Friend referred to. This investment—the
biggest ever in the NHS—reflects the fact that the NHS is the public’s No. 1 priority, as indeed it is the Government’s No. 1 priority, and is an indication of the Prime Minister’s personal commitment to funding the NHS and ensuring it is fit for the future.

My right hon. Friend will be aware that the application window has now closed. I know that considerable work was done following the earlier application when a bid of between £500 million and £600 million was submitted. I am sure he will recognise that this was a significant sum but that the further work has brought it closer to the £330 million, and officials in NHS England and NHS Improvement are working closely with the Department to evaluate that bid alongside the other bids. As I mentioned in the previous debate, all bids will be assessed against standard criteria, including their value for money and contribution to transforming services and managing demand sustainably, as well as demonstrating their fit within a wider STP level estate strategy.

My right hon. Friend asked about timescales. The timescales are as previously referred to, with the commitment to decisions being made in the autumn. That position has not changed.

It is worth remembering that STP funding is only one element of support available to trusts. In 2017-18, the trust was successful in securing £2 million of emergency department capital funding to support the redesign of the emergency department. This funding was targeted to improve facilities and support improvements, including investment in paediatrics and the emergency department. In this financial year, capital funding to support winter pressures is also available to the trust, and this funding is part of the £145 million given to 80 NHS trusts across the country ahead of winter to improve emergency care. I understand that this money is earmarked for increasing bed capacity.

As we discussed in the summer, the trust recently exited special measures, with two thirds of services moving to a good or outstanding rating. This is a big achievement, and I know that the focus for 2018-19 is to achieve a good rating from the Care Quality Commission. My right hon. Friend has spoken about this in previous debates, and I join him once again in paying tribute to the staff who worked so hard to take the trust out of special measures.

It is clear that the hospital is a vital element of the local economy. I know that the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust has been working hard to improve recruitment and retention, and I am pleased that this is still a focus for it. The hospital is one of Health Education England’s nursing associate pilot sites through its lead partner, Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, and I am aware of plans for a huge expansion in the numbers of nursing associates through the apprentice route, which will positively impact on the work of the trust.

As I am sure the House is well aware, my right hon. Friend, like me, is a keen supporter of apprenticeships. I know that the hospital has taken on apprentices in the last year but that the number of apprentices is well below the target. It should be noted that any nursing associates in training as part of the scheme I just mentioned will not be included in the apprentice figures. As of April 2018, we know of 18 apprentices starting at the hospital, against a target of 76. I am keen to work with my right hon. Friend to continue the work that he has done in the House to ensure that the hospital meets that apprenticeship target. Both he and I are strongly committed to bringing more apprentices into the workforce.

My right hon. Friend referred to the Harlow science hub campus programme. Partly as a result of his campaigning, there will be a new public health campus in Harlow, at a cost of about £400 million. Not only are the Government making a significant contribution to the NHS, but the fact that the project is still on schedule— and by 2024, following a phased opening from 2021, approximately 2,700 staff will be based there—is a significant tribute to the work that my right hon. Friend has done, along with others, in securing a much-sought-after commitment to Harlow. I know that Public Health England and the Princess Alexandra Hospital have been discussing the opportunities that will arise as a result of the move to Harlow, and I hope to hear more about that soon.

I commend the work that my right hon. Friend is doing to raise support for the STP bid by the Princess Alexandra Hospital Trust. He has raised the estate issues faced by the trust on more than one occasion in the House, and in meetings with the Secretary of State and me, and I know that he raised them with my predecessor as well. We recognise that the hospital estate is in poor condition, which is why I am pleased that the trust has submitted the revised STP bid. I am also pleased that money was made available last year, and will be made available again this year, to make improvements to the hospital in the interim.

I look forward to continuing to work on this issue with my right hon. Friend, and working on the future of the NHS in Harlow as well as the surrounding region. As has been made clear again this evening, Madam Deputy Speaker—alongside your own work—the patients and staff of the hospital can be confident that they could have no better champion than my right hon. Friend, who has campaigned to secure this much-needed investment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): What an excellent, meaningful, well-targeted debate. Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

School Funding

1. Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of schools funding.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): More money is going into schools than ever before. Schools will receive over £42 billion of core funding this year and £43.5 billion next year. Our investment in schools is paying off, with 86% of schools now rated good or outstanding compared with 68% in 2010. Schools funding for 2020-21 onwards will be considered along with all areas of non-NHS departmental spending at next year’s spending review.

Sir Vince Cable: The Chancellor will already be aware that the £400 million for “little extras” has gone down like a lead balloon with schools that cannot afford the basics, but will he explain why there was not even a penny of additional money for post-16 colleges, most of which are in a desperate financial position and cannot carry out their training functions? Is the further education sector just another “little extra”?

Mr Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we have launched a significant initiative for the FE sector with the Government’s new T-level programme, which is being rolled out over the next few years. The programme involves a funding commitment of an additional £500 million a year to increase contact time between learners and teachers or work environments.

Mr Hammond: Of course. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. They say, don’t they, that no one ever forgets a good teacher? This is about excellence in teaching and in the leadership of our schools, and a well-resourced system led by excellent leaders and staffed by brilliant teachers is the best guarantee of Britain’s bright future.

Mr Hammond: What the hon. Gentleman does know, but chooses not to say, is that as a result of the measures announced in the Budget last week, including the huge increase in NHS England funding, Scotland will receive over £2 billion more through the Barnett formula by 2023-24.

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend will know, we are putting a record £6 billion into childcare and guaranteeing working parents 30 hours a week of childcare for three and four-year-olds, but I am happy to ask one of my colleagues to meet him. We are always happy to discuss such issues. This aspect of funding, along with all others, can also be considered in the round at the spending review.

20. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Austerity under this Government and the previous one has cost the Scottish Government £2 billion, meaning less money for education and other public services. Will the Chancellor bring an end to this failed austerity and also repay the £175 million from VAT on police and fire services?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on both counts. He might also be interested in the OECD data, which shows that England is the top spender in the G7 on schools and colleges delivering primary and secondary education, as a percentage of GDP. We spend more on primary and secondary education than Germany, France, Japan and Australia, both as a percentage of GDP and on a per pupil basis.
Leaving the EU: Tax Revenues

2. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on tax revenues of the UK leaving the EU. [907468]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government will be coming forward with a full and appropriate analysis of the impact of the deal we negotiate with the European Union well in time for the meaningful vote.

Christian Matheson: The Government’s own figures demonstrate between a 2% and 8% hit on the broader economy after Brexit. Is it not the case that there is no form of Brexit that will not have a massive impact on the public finances and, therefore, on public services?

Mel Stride: We are in the middle of a negotiation. At the appropriate moment, when we know exactly what the deal is—the deal that is available and that we have negotiated—we will of course come forward with a full and comprehensive analysis of both the fiscal and the economic impacts of that deal.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Is it not important that the public and Parliament are able to scrutinise not just the Treasury assumptions on tax as we leave the European Union but the Treasury assumptions on all aspects of the economy under the Treasury's CGE—computable general equilibrium—model? Will the Treasury publish that model as soon as possible?

Mel Stride: As I say, we will come forward with a full and appropriate analysis. Of course, prior to the meaningful vote, the Government will ensure that there is appropriate time to fully debate all these matters.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Our country already suffers from brutal inequality, so will the Minister say whether that analysis will be broken down by region and sub-region so we can see exactly what the impact of Brexit will be on the communities we represent?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady will know, under this Government income inequality is far lower than it was under Labour. I am not going to start getting involved in a running commentary on the negotiations and the various impacts thereof, as that would not be helpful, other than to restate that a full and appropriate analysis will be provided to the House prior to the meaningful vote.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will Ministers consider moving the trigger point for the application of the zero rate of VAT for new build dwellings as defined in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which would end the unintended discrimination, both before and after we leave the EU, against self-build and custom house building projects, while not harming Government revenue?

Mel Stride: That is possibly the most ingenious question I have ever heard in this House, and it is indicative of my hon. Friend’s passion for and commitment to this matter. I recognise the issue he raises on the zero-rating of new builds, on which he wishes to extend the scope somewhat. I believe that my office has now arranged a meeting with him, and I look forward to it taking place within the coming days and weeks.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister ensure that both he and the Chancellor take steps in advance of the next Budget to ensure that thousands of jobs can be created, particularly in Northern Ireland, by looking at air passenger duty and at VAT in the hospitality sector?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have consulted on APD and VAT on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we have now reported back on that consultation. We are setting up a technical working group to look specifically at the issue of short-haul APD to see whether there is some way in which that could be addressed.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Even before that great day, what reassurance can the Minister give to those of us who hold on to the quaint belief that Budgets should balance?

Mel Stride: We take a very balanced approach to the economy, which of course includes ensuring that we stick rigorously to our fiscal rules. We have met the two intermediate rules a full three years early. We continue to bear down on the deficit, and debt as a percentage of GDP will continue to fall throughout every year of this Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Each additional EU citizen working in Scotland contributes £10,400 to Government revenue. What assessment has the Minister made of the reduction in tax revenue as a result of the ending of free movement?

Mel Stride: I am sorry to keep reverting to the same answer, but it is effectively the same question that I keep being asked: “What will the analysis look like when the deal is concluded?” Of course that prompts the question of what exactly the deal will be. In the fullness of time, when the deal is agreed, we will come back to the House with a full analysis.

Kirsty Blackman: Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs can collect customs duties only if it has a working customs declaration service going. How is HMRC going to achieve the Government’s commitment in the Red Book to halve the time it takes to apply for customs trusted trader status?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises the issue of the CDS system. The current expectation is that that will be fully functioning by the end of March next year, which means we therefore have a robust back-up in the extension of the CHIEF—Customs Handling of Import and Export Freight—system. This is to make sure that that gears up for the huge increase in the number of customs declarations that will need to be made in a no-deal situation. We will of course continue to work hard on that matter.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Further to the answer the Financial Secretary gave to my hon. Friend the Member for...
Dover (Charlie Elphicke), will he publish, when he is publishing the CGE analysis, the assumptions underlying all potential EU exit scenarios, including those on World Trade Organisation terms and with a free trade agreement?

Mel Stride: The commitment we have made is that the deal agreed between us and the EU—we are confident we will achieve exactly that—will be fully analysed in an appropriate way and delivered to this House so that during the days in the run-up to the meaningful vote all Members of the House will have an opportunity to properly study that analysis.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Last week’s Budget certainly did not end austerity, but we all heard that things could be even worse in the event that the Government fail to get a good Brexit deal. In the Chancellor’s own words, that would necessitate a new Budget entirely, so may I ask the Financial Secretary an entirely straight question: how will the Government react to the loss of even 10% of our tax revenues from financial services in the now likely event that our market access is diminished?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of financial services, and of course he will be aware that recent progress has been made on that issue with our European partners in the negotiation. As for the impact of an actual deal, as I say, we do not know exactly what that deal will look like at this stage. When we do, we will come forward to the House with an appropriate announcement.

Jonathan Reynolds: The reason the Minister keeps having to give the same answer is that the Government’s answer is woefully inadequate. Business needs certainty and the Government have run out of time, so will he at least acknowledge that securing no more than equivalence to what is already available to third countries would be insufficient? Is it not the case that if people want a Brexit deal that really protects jobs and tax revenues, and they want to end austerity, the only way they can have both is with a Labour Government?

Mel Stride: It was all going so well—not that well, actually, but it got a sight worse towards the end. Government Members know that we are taking the responsible decisions to move forward a very difficult and detailed negotiation. At the appropriate time, when we have a deal—we are confident we will do that—we will present it to the House, and the House will then be able to express its view on it.

Universal Credit: Household Income

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential effect on household income of the roll-out of universal credit.

Elizabeth Truss: In the Budget, we announced an additional £630 for every family on UC. The Resolution Foundation has confirmed that this is more generous than the previous benefits system, but it is also better at keeping people in work. The reality is that if the Labour party was in power there would be no money to spend on those families, there would be no money for tax cuts and taxes would be going up for ordinary people.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Universal credit comes to my constituency next month. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the changes made in last week’s Budget mean that there is more support for working families with children, more support for people with disabilities and more support for the self-employed and that, crucially, people will not need to wait five weeks for a payment?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Under the previous Labour Government, we saw 20% of young people unemployed and we saw families trapped on benefits. What we have done is create a system where it pays to work. There are now a record number of children in houses where parents are out at work. That is good for them and good for the next generation.
Leaving the EU: No Deal

4. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the potential effect on the OBR’s Budget 2018 forecasts of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

John Glen: What is clear is that we will have greater freedom in terms of how we implement sanctions and anti-money laundering regimes, and that will give us the opportunity to fix measures that are appropriate for this country, and the revenues will flow from that.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Surely the greatest threat to this country is not no deal, but a Labour Government and the tax bombshell that would come with them.

John Glen: I agree wholeheartedly with that characterisation of the risks associated with the Opposition ever getting into power. The enormous increases in taxes for businesses would hit consumers and be appalling for the state of the economy.

Productivity

5. Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase productivity in the economy.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Budget set out the next steps in our plan to raise productivity and to grow the economy. That included increasing the national productivity investment fund to more than £37 billion to fund the largest sustained investment in our national infrastructure since the 1970s.

Lee Rowley: With that very increase in infrastructure funding to £37 billion, what opportunities are there in places such as North East Derbyshire to invest in regeneration and communities?

Robert Jenrick: The plans set out in the Budget were designed exactly for parts of the country such as my hon. Friend’s constituency. The £28.8 billion national roads fund will provide the largest ever investment in our strategic roads, and more money for potholes and pinch points. The future high streets fund will enable small towns across the country, including in the midlands, to be transformed and become thriving communities once more.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): How does the announcement in the Budget that non-NHS capital funding will actually fall in the coming years help the country’s productivity?

Robert Jenrick: The Budget announced the largest increase in capital spend in our economic infrastructure since the 1970s. Under this Government, investment in our economic infrastructure will be £460 million a week higher than under the last Labour Government.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The Chancellor has announced that he will be improving productivity by stopping inefficient public sector contracting—basically, abolishing the use of the private finance initiative and private finance 2. Can more be done to reduce the £240 billion bill to our country left by the Labour party?

Robert Jenrick: Yes. We are ending the scandal of PF1 that was created by the last Labour Government. Eighty-six per cent. of PF1 contracts were signed by the last Labour Government—91% by value. In addition to retiring PF1 we are creating a crack team, beginning in
the Department of Health and Social Care, to look back at some of those old contracts and to clean out the stable left by the last Labour Government.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): This Government and their coalition predecessors have overseen the longest slump in wages in living memory. What effect has that had on productivity?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of this, but real wages are rising. The Government believe that the best way to support working people across the country is to get them into work. Employment is now at its highest level in my lifetime, with 3 million more jobs created and 1 million fewer people on the dole.

**Multinational Digital Businesses: Tax**

6. **Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What plans he has to raise additional tax revenues from multinational digital businesses. [907472]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** The Government have announced that we will be introducing a digital services tax on the UK revenues of large social media platforms, search engines and online marketplaces. The tax is expected to raise around £1.5 billion over four years, ensuring that digital businesses make a fair contribution to the public finances.

**Neil O’Brien:** Members of Market Harborough chamber of commerce and my local Federation of Small Businesses have for some time been calling for the Chancellor to bring in a new tax on the digital giants and to use the proceeds to help small businesses on the high street. First, may I congratulate the Chancellor on taking such sensible economic advice? Secondly, can he tell us how much small businesses will benefit by?

**Mr Hammond:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend and his constituents for the advice; and, while we are at it, I wish him a happy birthday. The digital services tax aims to improve sustainability and fairness in the tax system. Separately, the Government have announced measures to support small retailers by cutting their business rates by one third for two years. Just to put that in a local context for my hon. Friend, there are 660 retail properties in Harborough local authority area with a rateable value of below £51,000, which means that there are 660 properties that could benefit.

14. **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Before we get too excited about this, we should bear it in mind that it is still a small amount of the profits of these large companies that will come into the Exchequer. Will the Chancellor explain the timetable for the consultation and when he expects to get any tax revenue into the Exchequer from this measure?

**Mr Hammond:** As I said last week, the proposal is to introduce the tax in 2020, but in the meantime we will continue to lead international negotiations on the potential for an internationally agreed tax. Such a tax would in fact be preferable to nationally implemented schemes, but at the moment it is proving very difficult to agree. I hope that, by the time we get to our implementation date in April 2020, we may yet have made progress on an internationally agreed measure.

**Support for the High Street**

7. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [907473]

8. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [907477]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** As my hon. Friends will know, in the Budget, we allocated £1.5 billion to supporting our high streets, including £675 million for our future high streets fund, and reduced business rates for smaller retailers by one third for the next two years.

**Alex Burghart:** Businesses in my constituency are giddy with excitement about this huge reduction in business rates. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what proportion of businesses on the high street are going to benefit from this?

**Mel Stride:** I am also giddy with excitement about this, and giddy with excitement to be able to inform my hon. Friend that up to 90% of smaller retailers, many of them in our high streets, will benefit from this package. That is in complete contrast to Labour’s policy of putting up taxes on small businesses. That is no way to support our high streets; it is Labour’s way to destroy business and jobs.

**Mark Pawsey:** On 1 December, I will be visiting retailers in Rugby town centre to support the Federation of Small Businesses’ Small Business Saturday. These businesses are in a tough and fast-changing environment. Does the Minister agree that the business rate incentive that he mentioned will go some way towards levelling the playing field between those retailers and those who operate online?

**Mel Stride:** I certainly agree. These changes will boost our high streets, and the FSB is to be congratulated on Small Business Saturday. I shall be in Ramsgate with my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) speaking to some of his retailers about this. I extend a non-partisan invitation to Labour Members to join us: we will go up our high streets talking to retailers about reducing their rates, and they can talk about the tax increases that they have to store for them.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The very short-term measure to give some businesses relief was announced at the Budget, but why did not the Chancellor announce the real cause of escalating business rates—the investors on our high streets from overseas who are really exploiting the market?

**Mel Stride:** I am slightly disappointed by the approach taken by the hon. Lady, for whom I have great respect, in pouring cold water on a major fiscal move such as this to reduce high street rates by one third, which will benefit approximately 90% of smaller retailers in her constituency. That is a shot in the arm for our high street and a shot in the arm for British business.
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the UK Government urgently commit further funding to prevent the loss of 200 additional police officers? Is the Chancellor aware that the businesses and entrepreneurs in the Tay cities deal are almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that, after negotiations, including negotiations involving the Scottish Government, the Tay cities deal is almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Chancellor aware that the businesses and entrepreneurs in the Tay cities deal are almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that, after negotiations, including negotiations involving the Scottish Government, the Tay cities deal is almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on maintaining entrepreneur’s relief. Does he agree that that not only helps to support people starting their own business but sends a strong signal that this Government are on the side of the entrepreneur, the risk taker and social mobility?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said in my Budget speech, after considering representations to scrap entrepreneur’s relief, I reached the conclusion that, unless we support entrepreneurs, we will not have a dynamic and vibrant economy that can support our first-class public services. Those two things go hand in hand.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Chancellor aware that the businesses and entrepreneurs in the Tay cities deal are almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

Mr Hammond: I am pleased to join my hon. Friend. In congratulating the BEST growth hub on its support for Essex businesses. That is a clear example of how England’s 38 growth hubs are helping businesses to start up and grow. Businesses in Essex, like those across England, will benefit from the further measures that I have announced on management training, mentoring and local peer networks, which will help businesses to grow by learning from our leading business schools and companies, as well as from one another.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Shops in Grimsby tell me that the biggest issue they face at the moment is shoplifting and antisocial behaviour, and local residents tell me that they are too scared to go into the town centre. We need to make sure that we have a strong police presence. What assurance can the Chancellor give me that the additional pension costs that Humberside police is facing will be covered by central grant funding, to prevent the loss of 200 additional police officers?

Mr Hammond: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter in more detail.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The £150 million investment in the Tay cities deal is welcome, but it short-changes my city and the surrounding area by £50 million—the Scottish Government have committed £200 million. Given the serious news of the proposed closure of Michelin in Dundee, with 850 jobs at risk, will the UK Government urgently commit further funding to the Tay cities deal and work constructively with the Scottish Government to protect those jobs?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said in my Budget speech, after considering representations to scrap entrepreneur’s relief, I reached the conclusion that, unless we support entrepreneurs, we will not have a dynamic and vibrant economy that can support our first-class public services. Those two things go hand in hand.

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another episode. If he really thinks that businesses look back fondly to the financial crisis, he needs to get out a bit more.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In his Budget speech, the Chancellor failed to make one single mention of climate change, yet by scrapping enhanced capital allowances for small and medium-sized enterprises, the Government have again cut vital support for energy efficiency and decarbonisation. Given the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change climate change report and given this Government’s support for fracking and their abysmal failure on tidal, onshore wind and solar, do the Conservatives realise that not only will they fail to meet their climate change targets, but they have breached their quota for hot air on this issue?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman might have been too busy preparing his question for today and in the process have missed the industrial energy efficiency fund that we have committed to introduce.

Skills and Training Funding

10. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to provide funding for skills and training.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): By 2019-20, we will be spending £2.5 billion on apprenticeships in England every year through the apprenticeship levy. In this Budget, we have given employers more flexibility to deploy it as they see best.

Alan Mak: Greater investment in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—skills is key to boosting employment in our growing digital economy. What support can the Chief Secretary give to ensure more training is available to our next generation of scientists, engineers and tech entrepreneurs?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We know that people with STEM skills have higher earnings. That is why we put more money into the maths premium last year to encourage more students to study that subject from 16 to 18. This year, we have launched a new programme to enable the better retention of maths and physics teachers in our schools.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): If, as the Chief Secretary says, there is now more money for skills funding, why did not the Chancellor announce in his Budget speech an uplifting of the cap on sixth-form and college funding from £4,000, which is causing real problems?

Elizabeth Truss: What the Chancellor announced in his Budget speech is the fact that we are giving employers more flexibility over apprenticeships, which they have asked for, and we are seeing more and more people going into high-level apprenticeships under this Government.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): West Oxfordshire businesses are thriving, but they are clear that their major challenge is access to people with the right skills. Will the Minister please give an update on the national retraining scheme and how that will help?

Elizabeth Truss: We put £20 million into the national retraining scheme, and I am very much looking forward to visiting my hon. Friend in Oxfordshire to see some of those fantastic businesses in situ.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that two thirds of UK firms have expressed concerns about a skills gap, will the Minister further outline what steps her Department has taken to provide schemes and support to businesses that are willing to take on apprenticeships but have not so far done so?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we want to encourage more small and medium-sized enterprises to take on apprenticeships. That is why we have reduced the level from 10% to 5% for co-investment, which will encourage more small firms to get involved, as well as extending the amount that can be used down the supply chain.

Public Finances

11. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to reduce the deficit and improve the public finances.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The 9.9% of GDP post-war record deficit that we inherited in 2010 is forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility to fall to 1.2% this year and to 0.8% of GDP in 2023-24, the lowest level since the start of the century. The OBR’s Budget forecast shows that borrowing will be lower in every year than was the case at the spring statement, and that we are now meeting our two fiscal rules three years early. We continue to be committed to our balanced approach—getting debt down, keeping taxes low, investing in Britain’s future and funding our public services, with the spending review to take place next year.

Theresa Villiers: The nature of the economic cycle means that, inevitably, over the next few years there will be a global economic downturn. Can the Chancellor reassure the House that he will always retain sufficient headroom and resilience in the public finances to enable us to respond strongly to such a shock?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and I remind my right hon. Friend that the fiscal targets are set in cyclically adjusted terms, so that in the event of an economic downturn, fiscal space is automatically created. In addition, I have kept a buffer, over and above any cyclical dividend, of £15.4 billion in 2020-21 to allow us firepower should any unexpected events cause headwinds for the economy.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): After the Budget, then, more than 3 million families will still be losing an average of £2,100 a year by transferring to universal credit. With 40% of claimants in debt and 38% in rent arrears, are not the Government simply transferring the nation’s debt into the pockets of the poorest families, and what assessment has the Chancellor made of their ability to move into work?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady should not have spoilt it. She was doing very well before she added a further bit that was not required.
Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady will have heard the Chief Secretary remind the House earlier that the Resolution Foundation has now identified that, with the additional money we have put into universal credit, the system is now more generous than the legacy system that it replaces. It has a clear incentivisation to work, and those of us on the Government Benches believe that the best way we can support and help and families is to help them into work. That is the sustainable route out of poverty.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Parliament passed legislation in 2016 to save hundreds of millions of pounds each year by limiting public sector exit payments to £95,000. As my right hon. Friend is so keen to improve public finances, why has he not yet implemented that legislation, which would have outlawed the obscene £474,000 exit payment recently announced for the chief executive of Dorset County Council, with many similar payouts to follow?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend raises a perfectly legitimate question. This is a complicated area. We are making progress on it and we hope and expect to be able to make an announcement shortly.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Just as the Chancellor’s claims to end austerity already lie in tatters, so do his claims of fiscal prudence, given the Institute for Fiscal Studies’ assessment that the Chancellor took a bit of a gamble with this Budget. Does he agree with the Father of the House that the Budget was based on an “unexpected surprise”, and that, “news about... tax revenues recently may not last”?—[Official Report, 1 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1099.]

If so, how worried is he about Standard & Poor’s warnings about the potential for recession if we leave the EU without a deal?

Mr Hammond: The Opposition try to have it all ways. Look, the truth is that our remarkable record in creating jobs—3.3 million new jobs in this country since 2010—forecast by the OBR to continue over the next four years, has led to a boom in fiscal revenues, which we have been able to deploy. The Budget that I delivered to the House last Monday shows debt falling in every year, the deficit falling in every year, and both of those metrics lower today than they were forecast to be at the spring. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) says, “Inequality up,” but unfortunately for him, he is wrong. Inequality in this country is lower now than it was under the last Labour Government.

Infrastructure: South-West

12. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps is he taking to provide funding for infrastructure in the South West.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer, but Cornwall relies on its only mainline rail link through south Devon, and it is well documented that it is very vulnerable to adverse weather. The Budget Red Book contained a reference to improving that rail link, but some in the south-west have doubted the Government’s commitment to it. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are committed to improving that railway, and that we now need Network Rail to get on with it?

Robert Jenrick: Protecting the line at Dawlish is a national priority. South-west Conservative MPs, including my hon. Friend, pressed that upon the Chancellor and me, and we restated our commitment in the Budget to finding a permanent solution that delivers super-resilience at Dawlish.

One Yorkshire Devolution Deal

13. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the proposed One Yorkshire devolution deal.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I have regular conversations with my counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, including on the One Yorkshire proposals. We have said that we will respond to any proposals that we receive in good faith, assuming that they are able to provide for economic growth in a clearly defined economic geography.

John Grogan: Does the Minister agree that the detailed economic case for One Yorkshire devolution, presented to the Treasury and to other Ministries by no fewer than 18 Yorkshire councils, many of them Conservative, is worthy of detailed discussion between the Government and local authorities, as specified in the legislation?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this matter. I have met stakeholders from the region on a number of occasions, including Councillor Judith Blake from Leeds. We have said that to progress this matter we want to see the Sheffield city region become fully functioning and the Mayor, who is now elected, able to conduct his duties. We think that is a reasonable way forward, so that local people in that area are not let down.

Renewable Energy

15. Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Due to the Government’s support, we have already seen the cost of renewables fall significantly. Offshore wind has halved in price since 2015 and the costs of other technologies are also falling.

Seema Malhotra: It is very surprising that the Chancellor’s Budget did not make any new commitments on renewable energy. Even worse is the fact that that comes with slashed grants for electric vehicles and plans to remove...
support for small-scale renewables. This was described by RenewableUK as a major blow to the sector. It also comes with the pursuit of fracking at any cost. On one of the greatest challenges we face today—clean, low carbon sustainable energy sources—why are the Government rolling back the clock?

Elizabeth Truss: Since 2010, we have reduced carbon dioxide emissions across the economy by 26% and across electricity generation by 47%. We are making sure that those technologies are competitive, so that they work well in the market, and so that we deliver lower prices to customers and lower levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere.

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

18. Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps is he taking to tackle tax avoidance and evasion.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have brought in over 100 measures to clamp down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance since 2010, protecting and yielding over £200 billion in revenue.

Mrs Badenoch: Some 19% of all businesses declared deliberate tax defaulters by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs this year were from the restaurant and takeaway business. Does the Minister agree that companies in this industry that do pay their taxes, such as the Chesterford business, do not have a level playing field?

Mel Stride: I cannot comment on a specific taxpayer, but I can say that HMRC does publish quarterly the names of those who deliberately default on taxation, as a method of bringing them forward to settle with HMRC. We have brought in a further 21 measures in the Budget to raise a further £2 billion by 2023-24 by clamping down on avoidance and evasion.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): How does a £200 million cut, announced in the Red Book, help with HMRC’s collection of taxes?

Mel Stride: HMRC has had an additional investment since 2010 of £2 billion. It has 28,000 full-time equivalent staff engaged in the mission of tax inspection and clamping down on avoidance and evasion. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the entire world, at 5.7%. That is far lower than was the case under the previous Labour Government. In fact, if we were stuck with the poor levels of tax collection under the Labour party, we would lose revenues equivalent to employing every policeman and policewoman in England and Wales.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is a very lucky boy today.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Topical question number one, Sir.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is getting ahead of himself. The reason why he is a lucky boy is that he is going to get two bites of the cherry. What he should now say is—mouth it after me—“Question 19”.

Sir Edward Leigh: So what are the Government doing to reduce—

Mr Speaker: No, no. I realise the hon. Gentleman has only been here for, I think, 35 years, but what he has to say is, “Question 19”.

SMEs: Tax

19. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to reduce the amount of tax payable by small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): My hon. and gallant Friend always gets there in the end and in my experience he is very good when he does. I can tell him that we do a great deal to support small businesses. We announced our one third reduction in the small business rate. Our tax rate for small business is declining. It is now 19% and it will fall to 17% in the next couple of years.

Sir Edward Leigh: Can the Minister assure me that by the end of this Parliament small businesses in Gainsborough will be paying less tax than they are now?

Mel Stride: I can assure my hon. and gallant Friend that the smaller retailers in his constituency will be paying about a third less in rates. He will see a further diminution of the general corporation tax rate. It was 28% in 2010 and it is now coming down to 17%. Of course, they will also benefit from other measures, such as the freezing of fuel duty, which will help many small businesses.

Topical Questions

T1. [907491] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in last week’s Budget. This is a Budget that supports our vital public services, such as the NHS, invests in Britain’s future, keeps taxes low and continues to reduce the nation’s debt. It is a Budget that shows that the hard work of the British people is paying off and that austerity is finally coming to an end. We have turned an important corner in this country and a bright, prosperous future is within our grasp.

Mr Speaker: Hopelessly long.

Sir Edward Leigh: As our economy is cyclical and sooner or later there will be another recession, will the Chancellor take this opportunity to deny the claim that by spending an extra £30 billion by 2023, we are going to be taking out of the economy exactly the same proportion as Gordon Brown did at the end of his chancellorship? Will the Chancellor assure me that we remain as committed as ever to fixing the roof while the sun shines and that he has a firm plan to reduce the debt?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I have a very firm plan to reduce the debt. My hon. Friend will see from the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast published last week that the debt will fall from over 85% of GDP to below
75% by the end of the forecast period. But my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have decided to take a balanced approach, where reducing the debt has to be place in tandem with keeping taxes low, supporting our public services and, probably most important of all, investing capital in Britain’s future.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): There are reports that the Cabinet has been briefed on a possible deal with the EU that includes a customs union that can be ended through a review mechanism at any stage in the future. So after two years of uncertainty, of business holding back investment and of jobs relocated abroad, we are now presented with a fudge that gives no guarantees on a long-term basis of our future trading relationship. Investment in our economy today is the lowest in the G7 and falling. If a customs union with our largest trading partner can be ripped up at any stage, how does the Chancellor expect businesses to have the confidence to bring forward the long-term investment needed to support our economy?

Mr Hammond: That was a perfectly reasonable—if a little long—question, but unfortunately, it was built on a false premise. The Cabinet has received no such briefing.

John McDonnell: Well, it is interesting, because the Chancellor knows then that a free trade agreement without a permanent customs union will not protect our economy from the damage that a hard Brexit would cause, so to guarantee frictionless supply chains, we need a secure, permanent customs union with the EU. Businesses and workers are looking to the Chancellor to fight their corner, so will he join me and MPs across the House in calling on the Prime Minister to do the sensible thing and agree a permanent customs union that protects our economy, and yes, the livelihoods of millions of our people?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman and I do not share very much in common, but we do share the desire to maintain frictionless trade between the UK and the European Union to protect British businesses and British jobs. His preferred way of achieving that is through a customs union; the Prime Minister has set out an alternative plan that will ensure that we can continue to have frictionless trade with the European Union. I prefer the Prime Minister’s plan.

There were over 9,000 words in the Chancellor’s Budget speech, but not one mention of Nottingham or the east midlands. In the east midlands, we have multiple investable schemes that will drive growth in our region. When will the Treasury back the east midlands?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The hon. Gentleman obviously missed the Chancellor’s speech at the Conservative party conference, in which he announced the creation of a special area of economic activity at Toton, just south of Nottingham, which we expect to become one of the UK’s leading areas of economic growth. We also announced in the Budget an increase in the transforming cities fund, which will directly benefit Nottingham.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the announcement in last week’s Budget of investment in our high streets, which will be particularly welcome in Bedworth in my constituency. I had meetings with local businesses recently on this very issue, and particularly on their frustrations at the lack of ambition of the local borough council. Can the Minister advise how local councils such as Nuneaton and Bedworth can best take advantage of this excellent opportunity?

Mel Stride: I recognise the huge amount of work my hon. Friend has put into the issue of revitalising our high streets, and his representations to me and other colleagues. The £675 million future high streets fund will be bid for on a competitive basis through local authorities, so it is very important that all Members encourage their local authorities to come forward with their bids.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The co-operative movement in the UK has a turnover of £36 billion. Given that it employs thousands, and that thousands will benefit as a result of the economic and social benefits that co-operatives bring, why was there no mention of the co-op movement in the Budget?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): As the hon. Gentleman knows, the co-operative movement is very important to our economy; we have met to discuss various aspects of its future. I am happy to meet him again to discuss the matters that he wishes to bring forward.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does the Budget not demonstrate that we have turned around the economic catastrophe left to us by the Labour party to deliver billions of pounds for public services, and tax cuts for millions of people up and down this country?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. The Government have delivered eight straight years of economic growth, over 3.3 million more people in work, and higher employment in every region and nation of
the United Kingdom. Wages are growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade, and the deficit is down by well over four fifths. In the Budget, we have gone further, cutting taxes and funding our vital public services.


Schools are still reeling from the Chancellor’s “little extras” quip, while colleges and sixth forms were given no thought at all in the Budget. Further to the letter of 15 October from the Education Committee to the Chancellor, will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury accept our invitation to give oral evidence to our inquiry on school and college funding?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): As the Chancellor pointed out, we have already put an additional £1.3 billion into schools’ budgets, which means that they are rising in real terms, and it is entirely proper for Education Ministers to appear in front of the Select Committee to discuss those issues.

T9. [907499] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Renewable energy developers working on wave and tidal power have presented a proposal for what they call innovation power purchase agreements, a mechanism whereby they might finally get their devices over the line into commercial deployment. Will the Chancellor, or perhaps the Chief Secretary, work with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on a proposal that could allow them and the developers to see the fruition of what could be a very important part of the Government’s industrial strategy?

Elizabeth Truss: As part of the spending review, we will look at the most efficient way in which we can meet our carbon targets. I am working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in that regard.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s announcement of £150 million of new money for the Tay cities deal, but may I ask him to direct some of his officials to speak to colleagues in BEIS to establish what support could be given to the devolved Administration in Dundee? The closure could mean the loss of 850 jobs, and we need to look forward to the devolved Administration to establish what they can do to help them forward.

Mr Philip Hammond: That is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, and I know that the Health Secretary is in discussion with the pharmaceutical industry. We are supporting the Department with allocations from the £3.5 billion I have allocated for Brexit preparations. We will ensure that adequate supplies of medicines are stockpiled if there is any risk of disruption at the channel ports.

Mr Hammond: That is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, and I know that the Health Secretary is in discussion with the pharmaceutical industry. We are supporting the Department with allocations from the £3.5 billion I have allocated for Brexit preparations. We will ensure that adequate supplies of medicines are stockpiled if there is any risk of disruption at the channel ports.

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balloon roundabout, in mind that we made the largest ever investment in our strategic road network. Decisions on specific roads will be made next year.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome HMRC’s rather belated decision to return tax wrongly paid by the Roadchef employee benefit trust. It is clearly now necessary to honour previously made commitments in respect of tax implications for beneficiaries. Did HMRC use its discretion to make that payout, and, if so, on what basis?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman and I have had a number of discussions about this issue, both formal and informal, and have engaged in an Adjournment debate on it. I have always been very attentive to his specific questions, but if he would like me to meet him again to discuss the issue further, I should be more than happy to do so.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Previous independent assessments of the impact of air passenger duty have shown that it costs the economy more than it brings into the Exchequer. May I have an assurance that the Treasury will do its own modelling to ensure that this island trading nation can compete better in the future?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes. The Treasury regularly receives independent assessments that tell us that taxes cost us more than they deliver to us, and I can assure my hon. Friend that the Treasury always does its own modelling to reach its decisions.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Chancellor is aware of the sad news about the Michelin plant in my constituency; its potential closure in 2020 would mean the loss of 850 jobs. It is early days, but may I ask the Chancellor for a straightforward commitment to work constructively with the Scottish Government and others—who are meeting representatives of the business today—to do whatever he can to preserve quality manufacturing on the site, and to protect and preserve as many jobs as possible?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Of course we will work constructively with the Scottish Government to ensure that we can mitigate in every way possible the impact on the community of these very large numbers of job losses.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not think we have heard from Mr Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This morning, the European Automobile Manufacturers Association released research demonstrating that all 270 new-generation diesel vehicles tested to date are below the emissions threshold on the road. In the light of this, will the Treasury team meet me and other colleagues to discuss how we can construct a road tax system that promotes clean diesel over old diesel and protects 9,000 jobs in my constituency?

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who I know is a champion for Jaguar Land Rover. I hope it will reassure him to know that I will discuss these issues with the chief executive of that company later today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we took every single person who has suffered a major traumatic brain injury—for instance, from a car crash—from needing four people in order to be able to wash, clothe and look after themselves to needing just one, and thereby leading a more independent life, we could save the taxpayers £5 billion a year. May I meet with the Chancellor to explain all this?

John Glen rose—

Chris Bryant: With the Chancellor.

John Glen: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have a previous interest in this subject. I commend the excellent work he has done with the all-party group on acquired brain injury, and am happy to meet him to discuss the matters he has raised.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the first of the two urgent questions, I remind the House that the sitting will be suspended at 1.45 pm and will resume at 3.15 pm. That is to accommodate the fact that significant numbers of colleagues are going to the commemorative Remembrance service in St Margaret’s church. It might be useful for colleagues to know that both urgent questions will therefore finish by 1.45 pm.
Police Pension Liabilities

12.41 pm

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) *(Urgent Question)*: To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on police pension liabilities and the National Police Chiefs Council’s threatened legal action against the Government.

**The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service** *(Mr Nick Hurd)*: I am sure the whole House agrees about the need for our public sector pensions to be properly funded and affordable for the long term. That is why the Government announced changes to the discount rate that applies to those pensions at both Budget 2016 and Budget 2018. These changes, I should stress, are based on the latest independent Office for Budget Responsibility projections for future GDP growth.

This change will lead to increased employer pension contribution costs for all unfunded public sector pensions, including those of police forces. Budget 2018 confirmed that there will be funding from the reserve to pay for part of the increase in costs for public services, including the police in 2019-20. My officials are in discussions with representatives from the NPCC and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to discuss how this additional funding will be distributed. Funding arrangements for 2020-21 onwards will be discussed as part of the spending review.

As the Chancellor made clear at the Budget, the Government recognise the pressures on the police, including from the changing nature of crime, and we will—Home Office and Treasury Ministers working together—review police funding power ahead of announcing the police funding settlement for 2019-20 in early December.

**Louise Haigh**: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

In a written ministerial statement in September, the Government thought it reasonable to try to sneak out the proposed changes to public sector pensions. The NPCC has said that this liability, dropped on police chiefs at the last minute, will cost £165 million in the next financial year, rising to £420 million in 2020-21. This could amount to the loss of a further 10,000 police officers. Despite what the Prime Minister has repeatedly, and shamefully, told this House—that the police have known about these changes “for years”—police chiefs issued a public statement rebuking the Prime Minister and saying the first notification they had came in September 2018. So quite apart from the fact that the Prime Minister should apologise to the House, the Government should apologise to the police for such rank incompetence. Is it any wonder that police chiefs are now taking the unprecedented step of taking the Government to court?

Without the Minister giving a firm commitment today that his Government will meet the full cost of these pension changes, it is inevitable that further officers will be lost next year. West Midlands police is preparing an emergency budget that could cost 500 police officers; the figure is £43 million for the Metropolitan police alone. Will the Minister commit today—not in the comprehensive spending review in a year’s time, and not in the police grant next month—to meeting the £165 million cost that the Government have left the police to pick up next year? Police forces need this security urgently. If he will not, does he accept that this will mean officer numbers being cut to the lowest levels on record?

Does the Minister further realise that the pension changes will cancel out the council tax rise that hard-pressed ratepayers have coughed up this year? Is that what he meant when he said that the precept rise would enable forces to spend on their local priorities? Will he confirm whether the Home Office has conducted any analysis of whether the police can afford to meet these changes, given that he has been telling them repeatedly to spend their reserves? How many police forces will go bankrupt as a result of these changes?

The police and our communities are facing twin crises. The surge in violent crime is devastating lives, and the crisis in police finances is leaving the police unable to respond. The Government’s serious violence taskforce has met just four times since its creation. That is a shameful response to the horrifying rise in violence, but the Government are not just complacent; they are actively making it harder for the police to keep us safe. It is time for Ministers to step back from the brink, apologise for the risks they have taken with our safety and give the police the resources they need to fight crime.

**Mr Hurd**: It would have been nice to hear from the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson some commitments or some recognition of the need to keep our public sector pensions properly funded and long-term affordable. I am sure that other Labour MPs will want to take the opportunity to make that clear to their constituents. That was one of the most disgraceful pieces of shroud-waving that I have heard, even from Labour Members. The hon. Lady knows the reality, because I am sure that she has studied Budget 2016 in detail. In it, the Treasury made it quite clear that there were likely to be changes to the discount rate that applies to public pensions.

What has changed is the independent Office for Budget Responsibility’s projection for GDP growth, which changes the discount rate that applies. That is a change, and I fully accept—the hon. Lady has heard me say this publicly—that it has resulted in an unbudgeted cost for the police of around £165 million next year. That is a serious issue—she has heard me say that publicly as well. I set that alongside other serious issues facing the police, such as the significant shift in demand and pressure on them, which we have recognised. We are working extremely hard with the police and the Treasury to find a solution.

What I would say to the hon. Lady is that, as a result of the action that this Government have taken on the economy, we are now in much better shape to resume our investment in policing. That is why, in this year, we have taken steps that have resulted in £460 million-worth of additional public money going into our policing system—the police settlement that Labour MPs voted against. We are on track to invest more as a country in our policing than promised under Labour, so she needs to be very careful about what she says about projections in this context.

Finally, as a London MP, I take offence at the hon. Lady’s statement about complacency on serious violence. She knows, because I know how seriously she takes this issue, that we are dealing with one of the most serious challenges that this society faces. We have beaten it before, 10 years ago, but we know that it is not simple.
[Mr Hurd]

We know that it involves complex, long-term work, which is why, under this Home Secretary, our ambition has been increased so that there will be more money for policing and more powers for the police coming through in the Offensive Weapons Bill. There is almost a quarter of a billion pounds of public money being committed to critical work on prevention and early intervention to ensure that we get the right balance between robust policing and really good prevention and intervention work over time. She knows, or should know, that we cannot police our way out of this system. We are addressing a very serious challenge with the right level of ambition and partnership with the police and the police and crime commissioners.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Some Members across the House are hoping that December’s police funding settlement may bring good news about dealing with unfair damping, which affects 19 police forces. However, if there is good news about damping, there would be concern that that may be counteracted by pension costs. Is my right hon. Friend able to say anything about that?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has been tireless in making the case for more funding for Bedfordshire police, and I am working hard with my colleagues at the Treasury and with officials to look again at the 2019-20 funding settlement as an opportunity to find a solution to the pensions issue. However, the path that we set this time last year has meant that almost every police force in the country is now recruiting additional officers, which is what we and the public we serve want.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee’s recent report pointed out that recorded crime has gone up by around a third, but the number of charges and arrests is down by a quarter, which reflects the real challenges that the police face. The Budget provided no additional money for mainstream policing across the country, and police chiefs are warning about a potential reduction in the number of police officers of 10,000 if additional money for pensions is not provided. What does the Minister have to say, not to MPs, but to those chief constables about their warnings? Will he provide extra pension money in the settlement before Christmas?

Mr Hurd: I hope that the right hon. Lady welcomed the news in the Budget about additional money for counter-terrorism policing and, crucially, for mental health. Through the work of the Home Affairs Committee and the many conversations that we have had with the police, she will know about the mental health demand on our police system, and that additional money must work to reduce demand on our police.

Given the right hon. Lady’s experience as a former Secretary of State, she will also know that the Budget is not where local police money is allocated. It is settled in the police funding settlement, and as the Chancellor and I have made clear, that deal is not settled. Work is ongoing between the Home Office and the Treasury to look again at what I indicated last year, and I will come to the House in early December with the results of that work.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I give my right hon. Friend every support in his negotiations with the Treasury. In addition to using reserves, funds must be found for pension liability above and beyond an increase to the police grant in December so that frontline officer numbers can rise.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive intervention. We share a desire to continue down the path we set, and as a result of the action that we have taken, almost every single police force in the country is now recruiting additional officers. We do not want to go backwards. We must solve the pension issue, and we are working closely with our Treasury colleagues to do just that.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the pension issue comes at a time that is not without problems that already exist. My constituency has seen an alarming rise in gun and knife crime, and a bus service was withdrawn last week after hooligans threw bricks at buses. The Minister needs to resolve the situation quickly; otherwise we run the risk of losing control of the streets.

Mr Hurd: I will resist any such scaremongering on this issue, but I do not need any lectures about the demand and pressures on the police following my conversations with all ranks of police leadership and with Members from both sides of the House. We are all in the same place, and even the Chancellor recognised here at the Dispatch Box the pressures on the police. We are trying to structure the right response to those pressures, and we are doing so from a position of growing economic confidence, which is in stark contrast to what the situation would be if Labour was in power.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us see whether we can get everyone in by 1.15 pm, which is when we need to move on.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I fully support the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). Will the Minister assure us that he will look carefully to ensure that the promised increases in police officers in Staffordshire and elsewhere are taken forward, because council taxpayers were promised that back in April?

Mr Hurd: I fully understand my hon. Friend’s point. If elected representatives have made commitments to their public, I quite understand the need to stand by them—we all do. As I said, the steps that I took last year, both in the 2018-19 funding settlement and what I indicated for 2019-20, have resulted in exactly what I wanted, which is that police and crime commissioners up and down the country are starting to recruit again. I want that to continue.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Humberside’s police and crime commissioner has delved into reserves to mitigate the loss of 440 police officers over the past eight years. He has just recruited an extra 250 police officers. To how many of those should he hand a P45?
Mr Hurd: To be honest, I am delighted that reserves are being put to good use because, in March 2018, Humberside was sitting on £28.9 million of public money, almost 17% of its annual budget. One of the things the Government have done is to force PCCs to be more transparent about their use of reserves, and I do not relish from that at all. I stress again that we recognise the problem, and there is determination and extremely hard work between the Treasury and the Home Office to find a solution in the police funding settlement in early December.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Police finances are incredibly stretched. Dumping £165 million of pension liabilities will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. I offer the Minister my 100% support in getting the Treasury to think again.

Mr Hurd: I am grateful, as always, for my hon. Friend’s support. He knows from our previous exchanges that the Government recognise there is a problem in how stretched the police system is, and we took steps last year that led to more money going into the system, which is welcome, even though it was opposed by Labour. He knows my determination to find a solution not just for the pensions issue but for the stretch on the police. There is a need to increase police capacity.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In my constituency, a 15-year-old child, Jay Hughes, was murdered on Thursday, another tragic victim of knife crime. Then, on Sunday, another young man was stabbed to death in Anerley, just metres from where teenager Michael Jonas was killed last year. This is a crisis. When so many lives are being lost on the streets of London, surely we should be funding the Met properly, not cutting its budget. When will the Government put in place a proper plan to protect our communities? I listened to the Minister’s answer to the urgent question with dismay. What does he have to say to the families affected by these senseless killings?

Mr Hurd: What I have to say to the families, and I speak as a London MP, is that the whole country and the whole Government are absolutely appalled and shocked by what is happening on the streets of London. It is not just a London issue, as the hon. Lady well knows; it is a national challenge. We are absolutely serious about getting on top of this, and she will know that we have been here before, 10 years ago, at a time when all the public finances were in a completely different place and when people were not asking, “Where are the police?” This is long-term, complex work, and we have to bear down on it.

The hon. Lady asked about funding for the Met police, and there is an additional £100 million going into the Met this year as a result of actions that we and the Mayor are taking. London has over one and a half times the national average for funding per head of population and for police officers per head of population.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: As he is a distinguished former broadcaster, I am sure the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) can demonstrate his mastery of the one-short-sentence question.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is reasonable to make extra provision, but can something also be done about the Labour West Midlands police and crime commissioner sitting on £100 million in reserves?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes a serious point. Across the police system, reserves have grown by hundreds of millions of pounds since 2011, at a time when all the public were hearing from the police system was, “We need more money.” One of the things we have done is to say, “Yes, you need reserves, but you need to account for how big those reserves are and what you intend to do with them.” That goes for the West Midlands police and crime commissioner, who has, I think, increased reserves by £20 million.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Police chiefs say that filling this pension deficit could cost up to 10,000 police officers. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Hurd: No, I do not. I think the number is exaggerated, which is not unusual for the police. I recognise that there is an un-budgeted cost, and I have given an undertaking to work very closely with the Treasury and with the Home Secretary to find a solution to both this and the additional resources and capacity needed to meet the very real demand pressures on the police.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): With Sussex police having welcomed 150 extra staff at the end of October, funded by council tax increases, will my right hon. Friend work with me and Katy Bourne to ensure that the police force has all the resources at its disposal to carry on increasing police numbers?

Mr Hurd: The public’s safety is the priority of this Government. We have made clear the priority we attach to police funding, and the Home Secretary has made his priority clear personally. We are absolutely determined to make sure the police have the resources they need. As we heard the Chancellor say in answer to questions before this, we are in an increasingly strong position because of the recovery of the economy, and austerity is ending, which means that the Conservatives, uniquely as a party, can take these steps—that is in stark contrast to the fiscally incredible Labour party.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Government Red Book says there will be £10.8 billion for the Home Office this year and £10.7 billion for it next year—that is £100 million less. Is the Minister going to revise that figure, or is he going to take that money from somewhere else?

Mr Hurd: As I have made clear, the next step in Parliament debating and discussing police funding is the 2019-20 funding settlement. As I did last year, I intend to come to the House in early December to set out this Government’s proposals, which are being worked through with our Treasury colleagues as we speak.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that not all the demand on the police is based on crime. What work will he be doing with police and crime commissioners, including Devon and Cornwall’s, to look at how that can be used to help release more resources for fighting crime?
Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Anyone who speaks to the police finds a consistent message from across the system: a growing frustration about the amount of time our police are spending supporting people on mental health issues—the estimate across the system is at least 25%. Some of that I would class as core policing but some of it is not, so we are working with PCCs to get the evidence base and establish what is good practice in terms of triaging some of this demand. Part of what I welcome in the Budget is the additional investment that this Government can now make in local mental health, and I am determined to ensure that one dividend from that investment is reduced demand on policing.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): In the past five weeks, three youths were stabbed, two fatally, and one 20-year-old man was shot dead in Bedford. Will the Minister support the bid from Bedfordshire’s police chief constable and the PCC for emergency extra funding from the police special grant before another young person is killed on our streets?

Mr Hurd: I was delighted to see the hon. Gentleman take part in the cross-sector summit we had on serious violence in Bedfordshire. What I said then was clear: we have received an application for exceptional funding and we expect to take a decision on that by the middle of the month. Our ability to meet that comes from the fact that we increased the contingency pot available in the Home Office for those situations, in a funding settlement that he and other Labour MPs voted against.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Just last Friday, I was out and about with the police in Long Eaton in my constituency, along with the Minister. Will he reassure me that resources will be provided to continue the vital work we saw at first hand during my constituency?

Mr Hurd: I know my hon. Friend. Friend thoroughly enjoyed her visit, and I repeat what I have said to other colleagues: we are taking steps in the right direction. The right direction is providing the resources for our police forces to increase their capacity and continue the process of recruiting the additional officers that we and the public want to see. We can do that because we are in a stronger economic position. My intention is to come to the House with the funding settlement in early December to update the House on our plans for next year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The House will have noticed that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) has perambulated. He was over there!

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am trying to get your attention, Mr Speaker. What does the Minister suggest Gwent police do: cut 100 police officer jobs or make local precept payers make up the difference?

Mr Hurd: Gwent was the first police force I visited, and I am well aware of some of the pressures on the force and some of the excellent work it is doing, not least in pursuing exploiters of children. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that Gwent is absolutely the outlier in the reserves it holds; it sits on £56 million-worth of public money as reserves, which is a stunning 46.3% of its funding. I think the people of Gwent deserve a clear explanation of how that public money is going to be used to support their local police service.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister will be aware that Humberside police has recruited more than 200 officers over the past couple of years. A threat to further recruitment or to our police community support officers due to increased pension contributions is now a real possibility. Will he assure me that he will work with me and other colleagues in the force area to ensure that that recruitment is not threatened?

Mr Hurd: I do not want to do anything that jeopardises the recruitment of police officers and the progress that we are making in that context—I have made that very clear. I have also made it clear that it is my intention to work very closely with colleagues from all parts of the House to make sure that we have a proper understanding of what is going on force by force. My main point is that we are able to make progress because of the progress that we are making on the economy, and that is progress that would be jeopardised by the Labour party.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): The number of police officers in Durham has been cut by 400 since 2010. That is not an exaggeration; that is a fact. These changes to the pension mean that another 30 officers will have to go and that there will have to be an increase in the precept by £12 for homes in band D. Will that not be perceived as a local tax for the Treasury and as incompetence by the Treasury?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman’s intervention gives me the opportunity again to place on the record the admiration of the Government for the performance of Durham police, which is an outstanding force. Against the context of reduced resources, it shows what it is possible to achieve. I understand the point he is making and I return to what I was saying, which is that we are working through the issues and will come back to the House in early December with what I hope will be a solution.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Essex, 150 additional officers are making a real difference in the fight against crime. Will the Minister work with the Treasury and reassure our excellent police, crime and fire commissioner, Roger Hirst, that this actuarial change to pension liabilities will not hit our frontline policing?

Mr Hurd: I am sure that my hon. Friend will share the determination of the Government to do the right thing by public pensions and to make sure that they are properly funded. What the Treasury is doing is as a result of independent advice, and its approach is the right one, but there is a recognition of the difficulty that this causes the police at a time when things are already difficult and demanding. I made some comments earlier about possible exaggeration on their part of the problem. I should be more cautious, because there is a very real issue of stretch on police; I just do not happen to believe that there is the loss of officer numbers that they have indicated, not least because I am working very closely to find a solution to that. My hon. Friend can be
assured that we at the Home Office, working closely with the Treasury, are determined to find a solution to this and to come to the House in early December with a police funding settlement that allows us to continue on the track of making sure that our police have the resources that they need in Essex and elsewhere.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am quite frankly amazed by the language that the Minister is using and by the fact that he told my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) to be careful about what she says. No one in my constituency is telling me to be careful about what I say about knife, gun and gang crime being on the rise. Will he accept that with Liverpool and Merseyside police there are special cases with problems of organised and gang crime, and agree that they will not lose any more money through this Government’s incompetence?

Mr Hurd: I absolutely recognise the spike in serious violence that we are dealing with; it is an unbelievably serious problem that applies not just to London but nationally, and the Government are responding to it. I have one note of caution. It is not my business to give lectures to the Opposition, but the reality is that I have sat here with Labour MPs who, session after session, pop up and down demanding more and more money for policing, but actually, in the Labour manifesto, the shadow Front-Bench team committed £300 million for policing, but actually, in the Labour manifesto, the shadow Front-Bench team committed £300 million additional funding to the police, which has been increased by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley to £780 million over this Parliament, whereas this Government have taken steps to put £460 million into the system in this year alone.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): From my discussions with frontline police, I know that the one thing they value above all else is the protection of their pensions. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that, in discussions about funding, the pension for frontline police officers is fully protected?

Mr Hurd: Yes, and that is absolutely the underlying motivation of what the Treasury has announced.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The police pension deficit is in no small part due to this Government’s policies of forcing experienced officers into early retirement and reducing the number of current serving officers by 21,000. Should the Government not shoulder the responsibility for the impact on the contributions that are required?

Mr Hurd: No, the proposed adjustments to the discount rates are independent advice based on adjustments to projected growth rates of the economy—growth rates that I would hope will be significantly higher than they would under a Labour Government.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): This is an issue that I have discussed with both my police and crime commissioner and my chief constable. Understandably, there is some concern. Will the Minister reassure them that he will work closely with police forces to fully understand the impact that this change will have and take any action necessary to protect vital frontline services?

Mr Hurd: I fully give that undertaking. We are working very closely with the chiefs and the police and crime commissioners to understand the implications, force by force, so that we get a real sense of the impact, rather than the one dominating the headlines. I can also give the assurance, as I have repeatedly today, that we are working very closely with colleagues in the Treasury to find a solution. I look forward to coming to the House in early December with the result of that work.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Owing to Government cuts, in West Yorkshire we have nearly 1,000 fewer uniformed police officers on our streets. As a former police employee for a decade, I know at first hand the impact that this is having on our communities. Will the Minister reassure me that there will be no further cuts to police numbers in Dewsbury and West Yorkshire?

Mr Hurd: I have been very clear that what I set out last year enabled police forces up and down the country to start recruiting officers again, and I want that to continue. I ask the hon. Lady to support us in holding the PCC to account for holding the Treasury to account for holding £72.7 million of public money—almost 18% of funding—in reserves. I am sure that her constituents will want to know how that money is going to be spent to benefit the local force.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): West Midlands police estimates that, if these changes go ahead in their current form, they will cost the force more than £22 million over the next two years, and the loss of hundreds of officers on top of the 2,000 who have already gone since 2010. The reserves that have been mentioned are already being used to fund current spending and will disappear by 2020. Does the Minister agree that it would be intolerable for the public to have to put up with the loss of hundreds more officers?

Mr Hurd: I have engaged closely with the West Midlands police and crime commissioner and the chief constable about some of the challenges facing the force, and these are real. They know that it is my intention to work through the issue and come to the House in early December with a funding settlement that works. We are working very closely with the police to build the evidence base for the Treasury’s comprehensive spending review, which the right hon. Gentleman knows is a major event in shaping police budgets for the next few years.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), I want to share a local teacher’s perspective on the losses:

“Last night I got that call that no one prepares you for...I’d just got home...it was just after seven and my own children were in the bath, ‘Sorry to bother you at home but can you talk?’ my headteacher on the other end of the line, her voice breaking in that way a person’s voice breaks slightly when they are trying their very best to remain strong even though all they want to do is cry. All I heard was ‘multiple...stabbing...murder scene...and the name Jai.’ This was a boy who I had known from the age of 8 and was now 15 and fighting for his life. An hour and a half later I heard the words ‘I’m really sorry but he’s gone.’ I broke down and cried. All I thought was how could this have happened?”

When can we talk about addressing knife crime and the Government’s public health approach?
Mr Hurd: These are terrible losses; each represents a young life cut terribly short. The hon. Lady knows as well as anyone in this House the devastating impact of these losses on friends, families and the broader community. This issue is one of the biggest challenges that we face as a Government and as a society, and everyone has a role to play in addressing it, not least teachers.

I salute the hon. Lady’s work and leadership on this matter. She will know from that work that there is no straightforward solution. This is long-term, complex work that requires robust policing and proactive, persistent investment in prevention and early intervention work to steer young people away from that life, those choices and the devastating consequences. I hope that she knows that whatever happens, the Government are absolutely committed to working with partners from both sides of the House and all parts of society to bear down on this problem. We have to end this terrible cycle of violence, but it will be long-term work.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Right across Merseyside, we have similar stories to those of my hon. Friend the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). Some 1,600 police staff have gone through Government cuts since 2010. If not funded, this proposal will cost another 300 police officers. Our PCC, Jane Kennedy, talks of these cuts swinging a “wrecking ball” through her budget. She is right to say so, isn’t she?

Mr Hurd: I spoke to Jane about this yesterday, when she and other PCCs were in the Home Office talking about the serious violence strategy. She was very clear, as she always is, about the pressures on Merseyside police. It is a consistent refrain across the system. I am very, very aware of it. That is why I took the steps I took last year. They were small steps but they were steps in the right direction. I intend to come to the House again in early December with the next stage in this journey, which is the 2019-20 funding settlement.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that, alongside the cuts that will fall on policing, our fire services are also liable for costs in the region of hundreds of millions of pounds? What is he going to do about that?

Mr Hurd: As I said in my statement, this issue affects all public services. We are in conversations with the fire services, as we are with the police. Their funding settlement is in a different cycle from the police, and we will address it in the next CSR.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Despite our having lost 1,000 police officers already, the Home Secretary’s plan means that another 350 jobs are under threat in Hampshire. Did the Minister really think that there is some sort of stealth arrangement around this position from the Treasury? That could not be further from the truth. It was signalled very explicitly in the 2016 Budget. What has changed is the discount rate applied, and that is the result of independent advice. I repeat what I have said. I have been to Portsmouth, at the hon. Gentleman’s request, and had many conversations with Hampshire police. It is doing an excellent job under difficult circumstances, and I am determined to do what I can to make sure that it has the resources available to continue to recruit more officers.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Northumbria police have already had budget cuts of over £140 million and lost 1,000 staff. If this goes through, the cost of £11 million over two years could equate to 220 officers lost. Can the Minister assure me and other Members that a way will be found to ensure that this cost is met?

Mr Hurd: Labour MPs, for reasons I understand, keeping popping up talking about cuts. They always ignore the fact that additional money has gone into the police system this year, with millions of pounds more going to Northumbria police—voted against, for reasons I continue not to understand, by the hon. Lady and others. The Government are extremely aware of the pressures on the police system. Another £460 million has gone into that system this year. I will come back to the House in a few weeks’ time with our proposals for next year. Meanwhile, we work very closely with the police to make a case at the next spending review for the next stages of resources that our police system needs.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): In the west midlands, murders are up by 33% in the last year and violent crime is up by 20%. Only last week, I went out on patrol with police in the west midlands, and I found that dedicated, devoted public servants are getting desperate because of the lack of support and resources. These cuts will make their position even worse and more demoralising. Will the Minister impress on the Treasury that the cost to the community and, in the long term, to the Treasury, will be far greater if it does not meet these costs?

Mr Hurd: Again, the hon. Gentleman talks about cuts when his force has received additional investment of £9.9 million in a settlement that he voted against. I repeat what I said. I am aware of the demand on the West Midlands police. I am aware that this is an unfunded cost. I am aware that we have to find a solution for it, and that is what I am doing, together with my colleagues at the Treasury.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that violent crime is up in our borough and police numbers are substantially down. When does he expect those trends to reverse?

Mr Hurd: As I have already signalled, the battle against violent crime and the determination we have to bear down on it is long-term work. We were in a similar place 10 years ago, and it took time to bear down on it then, but we know what works, and that is what we are applying.

In relation to the Met police, there is, as I said, an additional £100 million going into the Met this year. They are recruiting hundreds more officers at the moment, and the Met has over one and a half times the national average in terms of police officers per head. It is a stretched force, and a force that we ask to do a great deal. But, again, I hope to come back to the House in early December with our plans for next year.
The Secretary of State has instituted a wide-ranging review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation as restrictive practices. He has asked the Care Quality Commission to initiate that review immediately, and it will be undertaken in two stages. Furthermore, he has asked the NHS to address this issue in the long-term plan that it is writing for the future of the NHS, and I know that NHS leadership shares our passion to get this right. We will also address the role of local authorities in the social care Green Paper, and both of those will be published before Christmas.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that this question must finish no later than 1.45 pm, and if people have not got in by then, I am afraid that it is too bad.

Barbara Keeley: I want to put on record my disappointment that the Secretary of State tried to shoehorn an issue of this severity into an NHS policy announcement yesterday, and my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question.

The treatment of people with autism and learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units is nothing short of a national scandal. Six years ago, these units were described by the then chief executive of NHS England and the chief executive of the Care Quality Commission as a model of care that has “no place in the 21st century”.

Seven years after the Winterbourne View scandal, the Government have not rid the country of these units or substantially cut their use. Indeed, as the Minister said, there are still 2,315 people in assessment and treatment units, including 230 children, and the number of under-18s has been increasing.

A Sky News investigation last week revealed that, since 2015, at least 40 people with a learning disability or autism have died while in assessment and treatment units, and nine of those who died were aged 35 or under. Some of the country’s most vulnerable people are being exposed to physical abuse in institutions that the chief inspector of mental health services described as being “in danger of developing the same characteristics that Winterbourne View did.”

Can the Minister tell us why the NHS is still sanctioning the use of settings that expose thousands of vulnerable people to abuse, at a cost of half a billion pounds, despite the Government pledging to close them?

The transforming care programme has manifestly failed. What are the Government going to do to ensure funding is available for cash-strapped local councils to pay for community placements with care support for autistic people and people with a learning disability? The Times has revealed that the private companies running these units are making millions of pounds out of detaining vulnerable people in unsafe facilities, in one case funneling £25 million into a secret bank account in Belize. Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to immediately stop private companies that have a vested interest in keeping people with learning disabilities in these Bedlam-like conditions from doing that?
On Saturday, as the Minister has outlined, the Secretary of State ordered the Care Quality Commission to undertake a thematic review of assessment and treatment units, and he has ordered a serious incident review in the case of one young autistic woman, Bethany. Reviews are not urgent action, there are very many Bethanys trapped in seclusion, and 40 people have died in these units. Will the Minister tell us the timetable for the completion and publication of the CQC review and what urgent action can be taken to free all the young people and adults trapped in these appalling conditions?

Caroline Dinenage: Hon. Members will be very aware of and concerned about the report published this week by University College London. As the hon. Lady said, the report, which was commissioned by the NHS, draws attention to how people with learning disabilities die on average 15 to 20 years sooner than the general population, often for reasons that are not an inevitable consequence of any underlying medical condition. I was reassured that this report shows that programmes and opportunities that Government are putting in place to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities and autism are addressing some of the concerns. However, I share very strongly her views and the views of this report that there is still much further to go and that now is the time to take action.

As hon. Members will know, the LeDeR report—the learning disabilities mortality review—is looking into the deaths of all people with a learning disability. It published its second annual report in May and in their response in September the Government accepted all the recommendations and included detailed actions for implementing them. NHS England has also committed that the long-term plan for the NHS will include learning disability and autism as one of the four clinical priorities. The long-term plan will also set out the future of the transforming care programme, which the hon. Lady raised.

Government policy on restrictive practices, including seclusion, is to reduce their use. Where such interventions have to be used, they must be a last resort and the intervention should always be represented as the least restrictive option to meet immediate needs. Incidents of restrictive intervention are recorded in the mental health services dataset and this data is published. The Mental Health Act code of practice highlights the particularly adverse impact of seclusion on children and young people. It advises careful assessment and periodic reviews.

I want to turn to the Care Quality Commission review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation. The first stage of the review will focus on settings that relate most closely to Bethany’s circumstances, focusing on people of all ages receiving care on NHS and independent sector wards for people with learning disabilities and/or autism and on child and adolescent mental health wards. That will start immediately and this stage will report in May next year.

It is very important that service users, their families and people with lived experience are able to contribute to that. The second stage will report in the winter and will examine other settings in which segregation and prolonged seclusion are used. That stage will include NHS and independent sector mental health rehabilitation wards and low secure mental health wards for people of all ages, as well as residential care homes designated for the care of people with learning difficulties and/or autism. As I have said, individuals who have been subject to segregation and/or long-term seclusion and their families and carers will be invited to provide evidence, including through interviews. The Care Quality Commission will make recommendations at the end of both stages, which will seek to eliminate system-wide inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation, and ensure that vulnerable adults and children supported by health and social care are accorded the best possible care.

I should point out that not all the numbers that the hon. Lady spoke about are in separately identified assessment and treatment units. The data reports there being 2,315 in-patients with a learning disability and/or autism in mental health in-patient settings as of September, but some 360 of them were in in-patient settings described as for people with acute learning disabilities.

It is important that commissioners should be able to access very high-quality, value-for-money care in their local area, whichever organisation provides it. We recognise the concern that people have expressed about what happens in the transforming care process, but I see it very much as a process and not as an event that will continue. The NHS has transferred more than £50 million to ensure that the right care is put in place in respect of community support, so that people are better cared for when they are out in the community.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the Minister accept that, fundamentally, far too many people are ending up in terrible conditions in secure settings because of the inadequacy of social care? Will she commit to include in the Green Paper, which is to be brought forward before Christmas, the Green Paper for young adults as well as for older people? Will she absolutely commit to that coming forward before Christmas?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise that the cases in which people end up in a long-term residential setting often reveal a failure of joint working—of the wraparound services that people need to keep them in the community. We are looking at working-age adults as part of the social care Green Paper, and it will be published before Christmas.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that I chair the autism commission, which has been looking at health and fake medicine—some serious reports. Will she expand her vision? There is obviously something seriously wrong in the justice system and the fact that police are not trained to recognise and understand someone on the autism spectrum. We need Health and Justice to look into the issue thoroughly, because something is going wrong. We need to train people, and to train them now.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: training is fundamental. We have already accepted the LeDeR review’s recommendation that all health and social care staff should have mandatory training on how to care for people with learning disabilities and autism. I would very much like to see that sort of training spread more widely out into society.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why has the number of children detained in assessment and treatment units more than doubled in the past three years, from 110 to 230? 

Caroline Dinenage: That is a really good question. We are looking carefully at how we can support children much better so that they do not go into these sorts of units at all. As I say, it is about the wraparound services that can identify much earlier somebody who might be at a crisis point, and making sure that the care and support is put in place to prevent people from having to be admitted to units of this kind.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the Care Quality Commission needs to look into the endemic use of force in these institutions, as well as at the use of exclusion? Does she agree that unless and until we find a mechanism to transfer money from spending in these institutions to support in the community, we will never solve this problem?

Caroline Dinenage: The right hon. Gentleman has done so much work on this issue and cares about it intensely. NHS England has transferred more than £50 million, up front, so that clinical commissioning groups that are planning to close bed can start to provide the community provision that is crucial to keeping people well in the community and out of residential settings.

Norman Lamb: And use of force?

Caroline Dinenage: We are absolutely clear that force should not be used at all.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Learning disabilities and autism are no respecters of “devolved” or “reserved”, so will the Minister join me in calling for NHS Scotland and NHS England to work more closely together, pooling resources and expertise, so that all patients needing in-patient care across the United Kingdom can receive the best possible care?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. I think this speaks to the whole theme of people working together, communicating, collaborating, and putting the care that is needed in place for people when they need it. The ability to work across borders is fundamental to that.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It was over seven years ago that we came to this House to reflect on the incredibly disturbing “Panorama” footage of what happened at Winterbourne View. We have had countless statements in this House. I obtained an urgent question about this two years ago. We have seen data about the death that have occurred, and the fact that the numbers have not reduced. I would echo the question asked by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). The number of children in these units has doubled in the period in which the Government told us they would reduce the number by 50%. It is, frankly, a dereliction of duty, and Ministers should be apologetising to the people outside this House, in this country, who are detained in those assessment and treatment units.

Can the Minister tell us categorically, and actually answer the question—why has the number of children in these units doubled, and what exactly are she and her Government going to do to ensure that she meets their target of reducing it by 50% by next March?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not see this as a dereliction of duty. I think of the fact that the Secretary of State has triggered a serious incident review into Bethany’s case, and more broadly there is this thematic review, and that we are building the right support by means of the ongoing transforming care process. There is a meeting today, which I have not been able to attend because I had to be here, between all stakeholders in this area, but also with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, so that we can work together to ensure that children, above all, are protected.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcomed the Secretary of State’s words yesterday, when he made it very clear that he understands that the situation now needs urgent action. My constituent’s daughter died at the age of 25, having been sectioned, living in a padded cell; her weight rose to 26 stone when she was apparently being cared for. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about money and how we can better spend it; it is about the involvement of families, and a profound cultural change as well?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. I think that the setting she describes that her constituent was in has now been shut, but the point is well made, and actually it is not just about keeping people safe; it is about treating them with dignity and respect, and providing care that is compassionate.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Several months ago, the Minister met my constituent Isabelle Garnett, whose son Matthew became seriously unwell as a consequence of the treatment he received at St Andrew’s Hospital in Northampton, where Bethany is also receiving such appalling treatment. Matthew’s parents were so worried about his health in St Andrew’s that they thought he would die there. He suffered a broken arm, bruises and other injuries and lost a catastrophic amount of weight.

Matthew is now, thankfully, thriving in a community setting, at significantly less cost than the £12,000 a week that the NHS was spending on completely inappropriate care at St Andrew’s. St Andrew’s is not a fit for purpose location for young people with autism and learning disability. Despite the testimony of Isabelle and many parents like her, why have hospitals like St Andrew’s been allowed to expand, while there has been no expansion of the type of entirely appropriate community provision that is needed?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady brought Matthew’s mum to meet me and I was very disturbed by the photographs she showed me of how poorly he looked when he was in the St Andrew’s setting, and how much happier and so much better he looks now that he is in the right kind of community provision. It speaks volumes about exactly what we are trying to achieve—to get people out of such settings into the right kind of community provision. That is what this is about, but people can only be moved out of settings like St Andrew’s—which is a place that does require improvement—about which the Care Quality Commission is concerned, when the right provision is available in the community. That is why we are putting the money through NHS England into local provision.
Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s recent request to the CQC for an immediate review; it is very timely. Can the Minister assure the House, however, that the Government and the NHS are prepared to hear the uncomfortable truth, and change to find the right and compassionate care for those with autism and those with learning difficulties?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which gets to the root of the issue. It is not enough to ask people what they think and set up commissions and reviews; we have to listen to what people are saying but then we have to act. The thematic review the CQC is starting straight away is reporting back in two phases. That is important as it means that, as soon as the first phase comes back, we can start action straight away.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Can the Minister say what resources will be made available to local councils to enable people with learning disabilities and autism to move out of the units as a matter of urgency and into community placements?

Caroline Dinenage: NHS England transferred over £50 million up front to CCGs that are closing beds over the course of the financial year, so that they can invest in community alternatives. In addition, between 2015 and March 2019 it will invest another £50 million in transforming funding to put in place things such as the much needed crisis prevention teams, which are focused on supporting children in the community.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The number of people with learning disabilities and autism in secure mental health hospitals is unacceptable and I welcome the commitment to reduce it. Can the Minister confirm exactly how she will monitor that and keep the House updated on progress?

Caroline Dinenage: That is the thrust of the whole transforming care and building the right support programme. We know that in some cases during the course of the programme people who have left residential units and gone into the community have gone back in to the units again. We have to keep a very close eye on the figures and ensure that the right package of support and care is provided so that once people leave a secure unit and go into the community, they are able to stay there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The sitting is suspended until 3.15 pm, so that Members can attend the Remembrance service in St Margaret’s Church.

1.41 pm

Sitting suspended for the Armistice centenary commemoration.

Child Maintenance

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

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove certain fees for child maintenance services; to make provision about the calculation of child maintenance payments; and for connected purposes.

I thank the co-sponsors of the Bill for their support. I also thank a number of Members who have introduced their own private Members’ Bills to reform and improve the Child Maintenance Service, including the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is to be commended on the work that she is doing to improve the CMS system.

I have been approached by numerous constituents asking for help with their CMS cases, as many other Members will have been. I have been approached both by parents with care and by non-resident parents. It is clear that the CMS does not function properly in its current form. In other words, it is letting down the children who should be at the heart of what it does. We have a duty to provide a system that respects the rights and obligations of both parents, but, ultimately, the rights and interests of children are paramount, and, sadly, I do not believe that the CMS meets that fundamental goal.

There are four specific ways in which the CMS could be improved in order to fulfil its intended purpose, and the aim of my Bill is to enact them. The 4% maintenance levy on parents requiring the collect-and-pay service should be abolished, as should the £20 application fee. There should be a reduction from 25% to 10% in the change-in-income threshold that must be breached for maintenance payments to be recalculated. Finally, the value of any equity in the non-resident parent’s primary residence should be included in maintenance calculations when it exceeds £500,000.

The Child Maintenance Service is there to help when parents cannot agree on child maintenance. It is supposed to be a public service that ensures that parents meet their responsibilities to their children, especially when they may not want to. I do not think anyone here thinks that a parent should not pay for their child, but believe me, there are parents out there who do not believe that they should—parents who attempt to duck and dive their way out of paying a single penny towards their child, because they perceive every payment as a payment towards their ex-partner.

Whatever reason a non-resident parent has for not paying, they should not be allowed to renege on their responsibilities, but most of all, their child should not pay the price. Currently, if a non-resident parent fails to make full and timely maintenance payments that the CMS has calculated on their behalf, the case will move to collect and pay. The CMS will then chase down the non-paying non-resident parent and collect maintenance on the receiving parent’s behalf. Parents with care—and therefore their children—then incur a maintenance tax of 4% on all payments collected. They are penalised for requiring the help of the CMS. They are charged because their ex-partner refuses to support their child. They are taxed through no fault of their own.
Using figures from the Department for Work and Pensions, the Library has estimated that in 2015-16 and 2016-17, £3.3 million was taken from families through the 4% maintenance tax. As a punishment, the non-paying non-resident parent will incur an additional 20% penalty and, potentially, other fines based on action such as a deduction from earnings order. How can it be justified that a child loses out because one of their parents will not meet the obligation to provide for them? The maintenance levy is not a tax on parents; it is a tax on children. It takes food from their table, clothes from their back, and money from their pockets that would allow them to enjoy the upbringing that every child should have.

The UK Government said in answer to a written question that the maintenance levy exists to encourage “parents to make Direct Pay work where they can.” The point of collect and pay is that all attempts have failed; parents have no choice but to turn to the CMS to collect the maintenance that their child is owed. It often feels as though the CMS is more intent on collecting payments to maintain itself than on maintaining the children whom it is supposed to serve. In the grand scheme of things, the collection of 4% charges is a pittance to the UK Government, but it could make a massive difference to children’s lives.

Likewise, the £20 application fee takes more money from families. It is most likely to be a parent with care who starts an application with the CMS because they have not been able to reach an agreement with their ex-partner. Again, they are being penalised for needing help in securing for their children the support they have a right to.

The Library estimates that in the past three years alone, the CMS has collected £4.8 million in application fees. That is money that could be spent on heating and eating, materials or clothes for school, or sports activities. Sadly, these are simple but common things that many families today struggle to afford. Single parent families are more likely to be in poverty than couples. A £20 application fee is another barrier that blocks low-income families from accessing vital support, and it can deter them from applying. The CMS should be free at the point of use to meet a need. It should not use parents and children as clients, and as a source of income.

I do not want to paint all non-resident parents as negligent—most want to do well by their child—but the CMS is unfair not only to parents with care, but to non-resident parents. A paying parent can amend their income, and therefore their calculations, only if their income changes by more than 25%. That is a huge threshold to meet. It can disproportionately affect parents on low incomes if their income decreases, while disproportionately benefiting those on higher incomes.

A constituent of mine had a low income that decreased by 24.9% exactly; he was struggling to make ends meet, as the maintenance that he has to pay is still based on the higher income he previously earned. For many parents, this could be an income that they earned up to six years ago. My constituent still wanted to support his child, but at a rate he could afford. Likewise, parents with care have approached me for help as they know that their ex-partner earns far more than they did when they disclosing their earnings to the CMS, but because their change in income did not exceed the 25% threshold, those parents with care were left receiving a lower rate.

Ultimately, a lower threshold of 10% would ensure that maintenance payments more accurately reflected what a parent earned; maintenance calculations would therefore be more accurate, which would benefit parents and children. That would still be in keeping with the Government’s aim of ensuring both minimal administration and financial stability for the parent with care.

I welcome many of the steps that the UK Government are only beginning to take to ensure that parents pay their maintenance on time and in full. What was needed was not necessarily more powers, but rather a greater willingness for the CMS to use the powers it had. It is also important, however, that maintenance calculations be a true reflection of parents’ incomes. The private Member’s Bill tabled by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire goes to great lengths to ensure that a person’s real worth is used in calculating their maintenance. The Government are introducing regulations that will take assets such as gold bullion into account, but we need to go further and take into account a person’s primary residence where there is equity in it of £500,000 or more. I do not know many people who have gold bullion lying about, but I do know people who own their home and have no mortgage or loan on it.

Homes are a major way in which a non-resident parent can increase their net worth, if their home increases in value. A £500,000 threshold will ensure that those who live in smaller homes do not face unreasonable additions to maintenance that may require them to sell their home. Only those who live in more expensive homes who can afford to pay will pay. The Conservative Government make a big deal about personal responsibility and families being self-reliant; now is their opportunity to show that they mean it with action, and to ensure that parents meet their responsibilities to their children.

The CMS is a public service, and it seems strange that parents are deterred from, and even charged for, accessing it when the cost to the public purse is so small and the benefits to children so large. With every pound collected under collect and pay, the UK Government are taking money that is rightfully the child’s. There has been recent progress on improving the CMS. I believe that the steps in my Bill will make a discernible difference to people’s lives—the life of the paying parent, the receiving parent and, ultimately, the child—and ensure that children have their rights respected and get the start in life that their parents owe them.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Marion Fellows, Neil Gray, Angela Crawley, Mhairi Black, Antoinette Sandbach, Liz Saville Roberts, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Alison Thewliss, Carol Monaghan, Sarah Champion and Carolyn Harris present the Bill.

Marion Fellows accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 284).

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha de Cordova), who unfortunately cannot be here today, is a member of the shadow Work and Pensions team and she has been urgently seeking an accessible copy of the managed migration regulations that the Secretary of State for Working Pensions announced
Mr Speaker: This is of course a matter for the occupants of the Treasury Bench, but my sense is that the hon. Lady has probably achieved, or will shortly achieve, her objective. She has aired the matter in the House, it has been heard by Ministers and it is on the record. The resources available to the Government are very considerable, and it is simply not acceptable that a Member of Parliament with a known additional need should not have that need, as near as possible, immediately satisfied. This was an entirely predictable request, and I hope that it will not be necessary for this matter to be aired again. I appreciate the fact that Ministers are nodding from a sedentary position on the Front Bench and I hope that the matter has been settled. I would be loath to pronounce on it again, and I rather imagine that the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) would not want that either. She should be able to just get on with her job, suitably supported.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the past few days, residents in my constituency, and particularly in Pollokshields, have been plagued by fireworks being set off and used as weapons. I understand that injury has been caused to a child, and that fireworks have been aimed at police officers, as well as members of the public. Have you been given any indication, perhaps by Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who have responsibility for fireworks, that they might make a statement or issue any guidance on this matter?

Mr Speaker: As of now, I have received no indication of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement to the House on this subject, or indeed to provide guidance. The former is something of which I would have expected to be notified; the latter, probably not. My advice to the hon. Lady, who is most dexterous and adroit in the use of parliamentary devices, is that if her wish remains unmet by the time the House returns next Monday, she should seek to draw the matter to the attention of the House then.

Centenary of the Armistice

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to move the motion, I should advise the House that no fewer than 34 Back-Bench Members wish to contribute. I know that the Secretary of State and his shadow, with their usual and customary sensitivity, will wish to tailor their own contributions to take account of colleagues’ interest.

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the centenary of the Armistice.

In May 1915, my grandfather arrived in France to fight for his country. Three years later, he came back. Millions of others did not or, if they did, came back terribly damaged, visibly or invisibly. They went to fight in what they knew as the great war: four years of blood, mud and misery in which humanity found new ways to kill and injure on a previously unimagined scale. When the cost and enormity of it could be better grasped, they came to call it, in shock, horror and, sadly, unrealistic optimism, the war to end all wars.

On Sunday, the nation will come together as one to pause and remember all those who died during this conflict and all those that have happened since. This year’s act of remembrance will be particularly special and poignant, however, as we mark the centenary of the end of the first world war. We have sought to commemorate the war in many ways over the past four years. For everyone, different events will stand out, but I will always remember the commemoration of the battle of Amiens at Amiens cathedral, which I was fortunate enough to attend. I sat in that magnificent cathedral with representatives of many countries that fought on both sides of the battles that marked the beginning of the end of the war, and I listened to the words of those who experienced them. Their emotions were deeply felt by those in the cathedral and, I am sure, by the millions watching on television and online.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I remember that I prepared a scrapbook of cuttings at the 50th anniversary for my grandfather who had fought in the first world war, but I was rather embarrassed in front of him because the coverage in the 1960s was relentlessly negative. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that historiography has now changed? Most people realise that it was a sacrifice worth making, that the alternative would have been militarism and that the soldiers were actually well led in 1918.

Jeremy Wright: It is undoubtedly right that the vast majority of people in this country will come together on Sunday, as they have come together on many occasions over the past four years, to remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives and who did so without a thought to their own interests and in the service of their nation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many Members will have had a family member who was involved in the first world war in one way or another, and some of us will have family memories of different battles. Like the Secretary of State’s grandfather, my grandfather took part in the battle of Loos, which is not
Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have not remembered every single battle over the past four years, but we have tried to remember a number of them. However, our collective effort to commemorate what happened is designed to encompass all battles and all those who fought in them.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his generosity in giving way. In common with many other Members, I will be joining remembrance events in my constituency on Sunday. I understand that the event held at Mirfield is the biggest and most well attended outside of London, so will he join me in welcoming the people in Mirfield who attend that event?

Jeremy Wright: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming that occasion. I am sure that it will be a particularly special year for her and for all those who attend.

The high-profile ceremonial events that I mentioned have been complemented by an extensive and engaging programme of cultural and educational activities. In 2012, the Government established the 14-18 NOW cultural programme to work with artists to tell these important stories through the mediums of culture and art. There has been a particular focus on engaging children and young people, with events including the great war school debate series and school battlefield tours, in which nearly 6,000 students and teachers visited the battlefields of northern France.

The groundbreaking 14-18 NOW programme has used its remit to enthrall people from all walks of live. More than 35 million people have engaged with the centenary, including 7.5 million young people under the age of 25. It has clearly demonstrated that contemporary artworks in public places can attract large, diverse audiences. Whether it was turning the country dark as part of the “Lights Out” programme or the ghost soldiers that appeared across the country to mark the centenary of the battle of the Somme, these events have all captured the public’s imagination and have given remembrance prominence in our daily lives.

The ceramic poppies at the Tower of London were another moving tribute, bringing the programme to one of our most popular and cherished attractions. The poppies have since travelled to 19 locations, from Belfast to Southend and from Orkney to Plymouth, and have been visited by more than 4 million people. From next year, they will be part of the collection of the Imperial War Museum, where they can be viewed for many years to come.

As part of our programme, we have sought to highlight the enormous contribution made by those who came to our nation’s aid from across the world. Some 2.5 million men and women from the Commonwealth answered the call to fight, with 200,000 laying down their lives. They left their homes thousands of miles away to serve the allied cause with unstinting bravery, often in unimaginable conditions, and they must not be forgotten or overlooked.

Works by an extraordinarily diverse range of artists from the UK and abroad have helped us to highlight those contributions. Poets from the Caribbean diaspora, visual artists from India and Bangladesh, performers from South Africa, musicians from Syria and many more have all highlighted the global reach and impact of the war. That was shown vividly in March 2015, when an event commemorating the second battle of Neuve Chapelle took place at the Imperial War Museum North. The event was co-ordinated by British Muslim, Hindu and Sikh organisations, supported by the Government. It compellingly showed the partnerships and friendships that we hold so dear and that were so instrumental during the war.

We have seen all too well how history can divide, but one clear and ambitious goal throughout this centenary period has been to seek to use history to bring us together. The Government have worked closely with the Irish Government, for example, over the past four years to mark these events. That was most clearly demonstrated in the shared approach to the battle of Messines Ridge commemoration in June 2017, which was attended by both His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge and the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny. The battle has considerable historic and symbolic significance for the UK and Ireland, as it was the first time that the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions fought alongside each other during the great war. The event provided a valuable opportunity to remember the service and sacrifice of those who fought, as well as to explore our shared history and support efforts to build a peaceful future.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the changing attitude, particularly in the Irish Republic, where for many decades there was little or no appreciation of that contribution? Does he agree that that should continue and, in fact, increase over the coming years?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The co-operation and full support we have received from the Irish Government has been most welcome, and I hope it will set a new tone for future commemorations. It is deeply appreciated by those on both sides of the border who have been involved in these commemorations.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Another way to commemorate the shared interest between Ireland and the UK is through the merchant navy. Many vessels sailed constantly through the great war between Ireland and Welsh ports, and there were many casualties. We have had commemorations of that this year, so will the Secretary of State put on record his thanks to the merchant seafarers of Ireland and Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom?

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly do that. I am sure the commemorations that will take place in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will make particular reference to those people, and that is entirely as it should be. It is also important to say that the German Government have been hugely supportive of our commemorations. Germany has been represented at very senior levels at all our events, and German military representatives have participated extensively.

One hundred years ago, the news of the Armistice was celebrated on these shores. On Remembrance Sunday this year, out of respect for living veterans, and the service’s wider purpose in remembering the fallen of all conflicts, we will share our usual sombre moment of
remembrance, with the customary two minutes’ silence. Wreaths will be laid at the Cenotaph, including, uniquely, one by the President of Germany. In recent months, there has been an unprecedented amount of commemorative activity up and down the country, leading up to that day. The nation is truly coming together, with commemorations up and down the country, leading to 11 November 1918 being celebrated as a significant day in our history. In dispatches from the frontline, soldiers often struggled to articulate how they felt when the guns stopped firing. They reported a mixture of joy, relief, numb disbelief and grief. For many, there was also a sense of achievement and justice.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Let me remind my right hon. and learned Friend of the words of Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy—“Woodbine Willie”:

“There are many kinds of sorrow in this world of love and hate but there is no keener sorrow than a soldier’s for his mate”.

Jeremy Wright: Those words put it well. It is evident in all the commemorations we have witnessed how much of what was done and sacrificed by those who fought was done in fellowship for those they went to fight with. I agree with my hon. Friend.

After the service of remembrance this year, we will give our thanks for the end of the war and show our support for those who returned. The traditional Royal British Legion parade of veterans will be followed by an additional procession of 10,000 members of the public paying personal tribute and giving thanks to the generation who served then. The procession will be complemented in the afternoon by the nationwide ringing of bells, across the UK, and throughout the rest of the world, echoing the bells that rang out after many years of silence 100 years ago. In the evening there will be a national service of reflection and thanksgiving in Westminster abbey, with similar services taking place across the UK. This will be a moving and inspiring day that will unite us all.

I am sure we will hear plenty more reflections on these events during this debate. Many people have been involved in making these commemorations a success: charities, including, of course, the Royal British Legion; civil society groups; officials from across the Government, including, in particular, those from my Department; and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They all deserve our thanks and congratulations. I would also like to thank the first world war advisory group for its guidance throughout this process. I want to make special mention of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who has acted throughout this period as the Prime Minister’s special representative for the first world war. I hope the House will hear from him this afternoon, and I think it true to say these commemorations would not have had the same shape and resonance as they have had without his considerable efforts. I would also like to pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), whom I am also delighted to see in his place this afternoon. I know he has also been passionate in wanting these commemorations to have the widest possible reach.

The first world war started more than a century ago, yet these commemorations have brought that war to life in ways that feel tangible and within our grasp. It is so important that future generations have the opportunity to hear these stories. This was a war not about monarchs or generals, but about people like us. In fact, 264 Members of this House served in that war, 22 of whom were killed. We remember the remarkable challenges faced by all those who fought, but we also remember that they came from our cities, towns and villages. They were people like us, and that should give us hope, as well as pride and sadness, because in those whom we remember, we see the huge capacity for service, for sacrifice, in people just like us, just when history needed it. They went off to war with friends and neighbours and workmates, or contributed in other ways, not because they thought they were special, but because they thought they were ordinary. They did what they thought everyone did for their country in its hour of need, but we remember them, and honour them, 100 years later, not because we know they were ordinary but because we know they were special.

Over the past four years, we have done our best to remember them all. I believe that we have done it well and that we can be proud not just of the people whom we have remembered, but of the way in which we have remembered them, and this House, and this nation, will always remember them.

3.46 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for what I thought was a solemn, dignified and thoughtful contribution to open the debate. I join him in paying tribute to the work of the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

It is genuinely a great honour to speak on behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition to mark Armistice Day in this debate and the centenary of the end of what was then the greatest military conflict that the world had ever seen. It is both a privilege and a duty, shared by all of us, to honour the sacrifice of all those who served in that war.

Today, I want to talk of remembrance but also of reconciliation, of internationalism, conflict resolution and the lessons of war. I wish to touch on the work of some of the institutions that support our veterans and honour the memory of the fallen. Remembrance Day and the poppies that so many of us are wearing today have come to symbolise not just the sacrifices of the great war, but the sacrifices made in all wars by all who play a part in them.

I remember when I was a child, many of the veterans of the great war were still with us and the veterans of the second world war, my grandparents’ generation, did not seem old—although they seemed old to me at the time. Today, all of those who served between 1914 and 1918 have passed away. Even the number of second world war veterans is dwindling. Just over a decade ago, I was privileged to play a part, along with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and other Members of this House, in efforts to ensure that the last great British war veteran, the last Tommy, to pass away, was properly honoured whoever they might have been.

Harry Patch, the last surviving British soldier to have fought in the trenches, died in 2009. Claude Choules, the last English-born great war combat veteran, who
served in the Royal Navy, died in 2011. Florence Green, the last surviving great war service veteran, died in 2012. With them, the great war passed irreversibly from living memory to history. As the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said in his intervention, it is the responsibility of all of us to continue to recognise the sacrifice that that generation made and to learn the lessons of history. No organisation has done more to recognise the sacrifice and the contribution of that first world war generation than the Royal British Legion.

The Legion was formed just after the war—the poppy of Flanders fields is its emblem—but it does not just commemorate; it also runs impressive modern campaigns relevant to today’s veterans, providing them with financial, emotional and psychological support. The Legion is desperately short of members. People think it is necessary to be a veteran to join, but it is not. In fact, it is a pleasure to see so many civilians in my constituency of West Bromwich East supporting this important organisation. As the Secretary of State alluded to, the legion’s commemoration this year is particularly important. We welcome the special khadi poppies that honour the 74,000 Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for Britain.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the contribution of soldiers from the Indian subcontinent, and for having signed the early-day motion for a national Sikh war memorial in central London. That is one of the reasons that he is held in such high regard within the global Sikh community, along with other right hon. and hon. Members of this House. Does he agree that it is wonderful to see many Sikh war memorials popping up in small towns across the country including in Gravesend, Coventry, the National Memorial Arboretum and now in Smethwick, and that those memorials are a symbol of people in those places displaying their pride?

Tom Watson: I do. My hon. Friend—the first turbaned Sikh on the Labour Benches in the House of Commons—stands up for the Sikh community and unites the House in our desire to show respect for the Sikhs who lost their lives in the great war.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very measured speech. During the remarkable service that we attended, I was thinking that my wife’s great uncle signed up at 17 years old in 1914 and was dead just before his 18th birthday in 1915 in the Battle of Loos. Many of my own family also served. We talk about remembrance a lot, but 28 years later this country was back at war again and my father was fighting for his life, to save democracy and to save freedom. Although we may not forget them, we also have to remember that we never want to repeat that process ever again.

Tom Watson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Later in my contribution I will touch on some of the lessons learned, and perhaps the mistakes that were made, after the Armistice was signed.

This year the Royal British Legion has also produced gold leaf poppies specifically to commemorate the centenary of the war. What is most remarkable about the Legion is not just the inspiring work its people do in the weeks that are leading up to Remembrance Sunday; it is the work they do all year round, reminding us all that remembrance is something we should do all year round.

Armistice Day has always been a bittersweet commemoration in this country: sweet because it marks the end of a war that scarred Europe and the world, the end of four years of industrialised killing, the like of which had never been seen before; sweet because for Britain and our allies it celebrates a victory against a war of aggression by Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, so it was celebrated at the time. When the news of the Armistice came through, cheering crowds gathered in every town square. There was dancing and singing, and church bells rang out for the first time in four years. It is fitting that bell ringing—not just in this country, but around the world—is part of this year’s centenary commemorations. And yet it is far more bitter than sweet. Armistice Day is always a solemn event of reflection and remembrance, and it is treated as such in wreath-laying ceremonies at memorials all over the country that hon. and right hon. Members from across this House will be attending in their constituencies this weekend.

Millions of men never came home—nearly 1 million British dead alone, lying alongside hundreds of thousands from what was then the British empire. Millions more returned with physical or psychological injuries, and with memories of the friends and comrades they left behind in the trenches of Flanders and the Somme, in Turkey and Palestine, in the Atlantic and the North sea. Of 14,000 parishes in England and Wales, only 50 saw all their soldiers come home, and every single community in Scotland and Ireland lost at least someone. Many places lost far more. The small village of Wadhurst in East Sussex lost 25 men in a single day in 1915, and 149 men altogether over the course of the war, from a total of just 3,500.

The so-called Pals battalions, made up of men from a particular local area, especially from our industrial towns and cities, serving alongside each other, often suffered losses whose impact on their communities is almost unthinkable and unimaginable today.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving an extraordinarily powerful tribute. Will he take into account the sacrifices in communities in Cheltenham, where, for example, in one street, Queen Street, of the 31 men who went to fight, a full 21 were killed—in one street alone? Does that not give an idea of the sense of the sacrifice and the extent to which communities were truly hollowed out by this ghastly episode?

Tom Watson: It does. The hon. Gentleman honours them by raising their memory in the House today, and I thank him for it.

Paula Sherriff: On Saturday, I attended a Dewsbury Sacrifices event. One thousand and fifty-three local men perished during the first world war, and Dewsbury Sacrifices has taken it upon itself to build a profile of every single one of those men. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming what it is doing?

Tom Watson: I do join my hon. Friend in that. In remembering them and knowing their lives, we honour their sacrifice. These events are taking place up and down the country.
To take just one of many more examples, on 1 July 1916, the opening day of the battle of the Somme, 235 of the Accrington Pals—the 11th (Service) Battalion East Lancashire Regiment—were killed, and 315 wounded, in the space of just 25 minutes. The fighting continued right up until literally the last few seconds before the Armistice was signed. More men died in 1918 than in any previous year of the war. The last British serviceman to be killed, Private George Edwin Ellison, died just one and a half hours before the Armistice, on the outskirts of Mons in Belgium, almost exactly the same place where British forces had first seen action in 1914. Indeed, George Ellison’s grave now faces that of John Parr, the first British soldier killed during the conflict. Between the deaths of John Parr in August 1914 and George Ellison in November 1918, 1.1 million British service personnel lost their lives—more than in any other conflict before or since.

Almost every city and town and village in Britain has a war memorial listing those who never returned from the great war. Thanks to the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the brave men and women who lost their lives during the war are remembered with gravestones and memorials across the world. I know the whole House would like to thank the gardeners and staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who do so much to ensure that our service personnel are honoured in fitting resting places. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Yet perhaps the bitterest element of this bitter-sweet commemoration, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, is that almost all of those war memorials have another plaque or another set of carvings listing those who never returned from the second world war, less than three decades later. The Armistice Day hopes of Lloyd George were dashed. Whatever else we might want to say about what was described as the war to end all wars, it turned out not to be the war to end all wars.

The great war was perhaps the last war in which people signed up to fight out of deference and patriotic fervour. We have all seen the photos of lines of young men, some of them perhaps lying about their age, desperate to join up and see action before the end of a war they believed would be over by Christmas. But in quite a short time, those deferential and patriotic sentiments were not enough to meet the needs of the military in a war on this scale, which is why conscription had to be introduced in 1916. The horrors of the western front made many in Britain doubt whether the war was worth it.

It was not only in this country that the success of the war effort relied on popular support. Russia’s experience on the eastern front, the gradual breakdown of its economy and the Russian people’s discontent with its leadership was a direct cause of the Russian revolution, which shaped global politics for the rest of the century and beyond. The mutinies of 1917 crippled the effectiveness of the French army. America’s entry into the war, which contributed so much to the allied victory, might not have been possible at all without the popular outrage generated by the German U-boat campaign sinking US civilian shipping, and the final German collapse owed much to the suffering of its population under the British naval blockade.

Leaders and generals do not operate in isolation, cold-bloodedly moving around blocks of troops, disconnected from the societies from which those troops are drawn. Political leaders have to earn and secure support for any military action, not just at the start but on an ongoing basis. That lesson has had to be learned again and again, from Algeria to Vietnam to Iraq.

The great war changed Britain forever in so many ways. This year we have also been celebrating the centenary of many women getting the vote—another momentous event in the momentous year of 1918. The achievement of women’s suffrage had many causes. The movement long preceded the great war, and achieving the vote was just one step on a path towards equality that still stretches before us. But the contribution of women to that war effort, in filling roles previously reserved for the men now fighting overseas, helped to solidify the argument that women were just as capable as men and had just as much right to political representation, making progress faster than it might otherwise have been.

In some ways—I realise that this could be controversial—Britain was lucky in 1918. Unlike France and Belgium, it was not scarred with bomb craters and ruined towns. Unlike Russia, it had no revolution or civil war. Unlike Germany, it had no reparations to pay or territory to concede. But its people bore the scars of war on their bodies and in their minds. They deserved and needed what Lloyd George promised them—a land fit for heroes. Instead, they got nearly two decades of economic slump, unemployment, poverty, poor housing and the great depression.

Both then and now, Britain has not always treated its service personnel with the respect they deserve. As a Defence Minister, I met Gertie, the daughter of Private Harry Farr, and her daughter, Janet Booth. They campaigned tirelessly for a pardon for their father and grandfather, who was shot at dawn for cowardice. Harry Farr was no coward. It was the dignity of his family and their tireless campaign that led to the pardons for the “shot at dawn” generation.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As vice-president of the Greenford branch of the Royal British Legion, I am sure I speak for the whole House when I express gratitude for my hon. Friend’s words about the Royal British Legion.

Harry Farr was one of 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers executed for what was then called cowardice or lack of moral fibre. I would like to thank publicly my hon. Friend, who was then the Minister, on behalf of my constituent Joannie Farr, one of Harry Farr’s granddaughters, for the pardon that he was so instrumental in gaining, along with Des Browne, now Lord Browne. Will he put it on the record once and for all that, if God forbid, we ever face such a situation again, we will look to offer compassion, not condemnation, to young men who buckle and sometimes crack in the face of horrors that we in this House cannot begin to imagine?

Tom Watson: I can, and we should. I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did on the campaign to ensure that Gertie’s dying wish was met.

I am proud of my role in righting what I saw as the injustice of the 306 soldiers that my hon. Friend mentions. Many of them had clearly been suffering from what was then called shellshock and what would now be called...
post-traumatic stress disorder. Their families were not entitled to a military pension and often faced great hardship. Granting them a pardon did not change what was done to them, but it eased the stigma felt by their loved ones over the generations. Anybody who has ever visited the National Memorial Arboretum to see the commemoration to those who were shot at dawn cannot fail to be moved.

We should pay tribute to the work of the National Memorial Arboretum in the west midlands, which allows so many to pay their respects to the men and women of our armed forces. As a young Minister, newly in post, I remember feeling my heart in my mouth when I had to give what is called a ministerial direction to underline the cost of the magnificent armed forces memorial that was opened by Her Majesty the Queen in October 2007 to honour the sacrifice of those who, in more than 50 operations and conflicts since the second world war, lost their lives in service. Today, we understand the impact of war better than we did 100 years ago.

With a smaller professional military, we do not have to face the challenge of reintegrating millions of ex-service personnel into the civilian economy. However, we do owe a duty of care to veterans and their families that lasts beyond the last echo of gunfire. That has to include physical and mental health support, as well as efforts to ensure that they have the skills they need to find civilian employment.

Both the great war and what came after it show us the need for internationalism. It was rival nationalisms that caused the war—rival imperial ambitions, rival insecurities and the escalation of responses to perceived threats until it was easier for the great powers to go to war than for them to back down from it. There can be no greater failure of diplomacy than the resort to armed conflict, even if armed conflict sometimes is the right response to a failure of diplomacy.

One of the causes of the failure of the Armistice to hold was the disastrous, punitive terms imposed on Germany by the treaty of Versailles in 1919 and its insistence on German war guilt, which both crippled its economy and fed the resentment that the Nazis were able to harness so effectively. As Marshal Foch prophetically said, Versailles was “not a peace treaty, it is an armistice for twenty years.”

After the great war, the world failed to build a sustainable peace.

The post-war League of Nations was a well-intentioned attempt to stop such a thing happening again, but it proved inadequate to the task of responding to the nationalism, fascism and territorial ambition of Hitler and Mussolini, Soviet expansionism, or indeed America’s First isolationism. The failure of the League of Nations showed the need for stronger international institutions, and since the second world war, for all their flaws, institutions including the United Nations, NATO and the European Union have helped us to avoid any repeat of war on a global scale, even if they have been unable to prevent myriad smaller conflicts.

Building lasting, sustainable peace is not easy, but it requires a commitment to internationalism, development, diplomacy and the fostering of economic ties between nations. Where necessary, it requires conflict resolution, but also a strong defence posture and a willingness to countenance military intervention as a last resort, not as a first step, as well as a framework of international laws and justice. Too many of these were absent in the aftermath of the great war, and the whole world paid a terrible price for the fragility of the Armistice.

If ever there is a time to forgive and reunite, it is 11 November 2018. This year, of all the articles written on the great war, the one that moved me the most was that written by Lord Michael Ashcroft, who made the case that courage is something displayed by service personnel on both sides of war and conflict. We should never forget that. He made a strong case for reconciliation in his tribute to the courage of Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.

There was some controversy last month when the Government revealed their plans to invite the German Head of State to the Cenotaph. However, it strikes me that in this year—100 years after men and women of courage gave their lives fighting for their countries—we should, in the spirit of reconciliation and peace, honour the valour and sacrifice of our opponents in the great war by inviting the German President to share in our remembrance. The Secretary of State was absolutely right to make that commitment.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and to colleagues for their thoughtful and humane interventions. We owe so much to all those who served and to all those who gave their lives in the great war that ended on 11 November 1918. One hundred years later, they still have much to teach us. As the Bishop of Lambeth said in his address to us in that very moving service: “War starts in the hearts and minds and souls of men and women like us. And peace, too, starts in the hearts and minds and souls of men and women like us.” Let us not just speak of peace, but let each and every one of us be the peacemakers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), I am moved to note for the benefit of the House the presence in our midst of members of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament, who spoke so movingly and so well in the service in St Margaret’s church. It is wonderful to have you with us today and I very much hope that I shall be seeing you again in this Chamber on Friday.

4.11 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is truly an honour to follow two such humane and comprehensive opening speeches.

Seventy-nine men from the village of Brockenhurst in the heart of the New Forest lost their lives in the great war—21 of them in the last year of that war alone—so it is hardly surprising that the village of Brockenhurst should have been early in the process of commemorating this particularly poignant centenary. Only last Saturday, I attended an outstanding commemoration concert that was held in the village. Back on Trafalgar Day, 21 October, the Tile Barn Poppy Pod village was dedicated to the memory of Enda Ryan, Hampshire County Council’s greatly respected outdoor facilities manager who recently died, far too young, from cancer. Each unit in the village commemorates a first world war battle, and service families can have respite breaks in the poppy pods at weekends, free of charge. The Tile Barn where they are sited was one of three New Zealand general
hospitals set up in 1916, during the first world war, to care for the wounded. Thousands of New Zealanders passed through it, and the 93 who did not survive are buried in nearby St Nicholas’ church.

I am sure that in this debate we will hear many tales of poignant recollection of the sacrifices made in villages such as Brockenhurst up and down the country, so I wish to list briefly what I regard as nine necessary lessons from the first world war. First, we must not think that we can successfully predict when a war will break out. I have often quoted in the House Sir Maurice Hankey—I shall not quote him again today—who in 1931 reviewed all the previous great conflicts in which the nation had been involved. He pointed out that, far from having 10 years’ warning—which is how far ahead people were saying in 1931 that we ought to be able to predict a great conflict—in the run-up to world war one, we had had barely 10 days’ warning of that war.

The second necessary lesson is not to sign up to multiple bilateral alliances rather than a single multilateral alliance. In the terrible connected development of circumstances that led to the catastrophe of 1914, we saw how individual separate alliances triggered one country after another in a process of what I suppose one could call falling dominoes, which meant that we ended up with a global conflict out of something that started on a relatively small scale. That is what explains the success of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation—the certain knowledge that any aggression against any one of its members will immediately trigger defence of that member by all the rest. I do not wish to be controversial in this debate of all debates, but that is why we have to be careful about other organisations, including the European Union, issuing security guarantees willy-nilly here and there, because we do not wish once again to get into a cross-cutting system of obligations and alliances that can lead to a chain reaction such as happened so disastrously in 1914.

The third lesson is this. Do not think that humanitarian restrictions on methods of warfare at the outbreak of a conflict will last very long. The idea, before the great war, that civilians would be deliberately targeted by the fighting services would probably have been scornfully rejected, yet as early as December 1914 we had the bombardment by the German navy of the seaside towns of Scarborough, Hartlepool and Whitby, when 137 people were killed in their own homes and 455 injured. That was followed by the Zeppelin airship raids, and the more lethal but less scary Gotha bomber raids—and who can forget that, in 1915, we saw the barbaric initiation of poison gas warfare?

The fourth lesson is, do not imagine that individual valour can overcome the mechanisation of warfare. We had the lethal combination of the machine gun and the barbed wire emplacements. Those defences could not be breached by hurling wave after wave of human bodies against them.

The fifth lesson is, do not repeat the failed methods of warfare time and again. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said that the troops were tell led in 1918. We lost in 1918, at the tail end of the war; it is just a great pity that they were not a lot earlier, because time and again it was shown beyond doubt that attrition did not work, and time and again—at the Somme and Passchendaele most outstandingly—it was tried long beyond the point where failure was an absolute certainty.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend and I recognise what he is saying about that issue. There is another feature, which is often not well reported; I think Keegan brought it out in his book on the first world war. The fact that communications had not advanced at the speed with which munitions had, meant that often news of what was actually happening on the front took nearly half a day to arrive back at divisional headquarters, so nothing could be changed. It is a really important issue. We tend to condemn the commanders, but we forget sometimes that they had no idea, quite often, what was happening for hours, let alone minutes.

Dr Lewis: I hesitate to disagree with my right hon. Friend, particularly because of his own gallant service and that of previous generations in his family, but I would refer to accounts at the time, such as that of such a considerable figure as Sholto Douglas, later Lord Wodehouse of Kirtleside, who became one of the most senior RAF officers in its history, who was flying over the battlefield of Passchendaele, and who observed in his memoirs, with all that retrospective knowledge, that it was still inconceivable that the troops were sent forward time and again into a sea of mud, when it was absolutely clear that the attack had failed and had no prospect of success. I know there is a revisionist view of history that says the lessons of the Somme and Passchendaele were needed so they could get it right for the 100 days campaign at the end of 1918, but frankly, with the greatest of respect, I do not buy it.

The sixth lesson is, do not underestimate the value of surprise. The decisive allied breakthrough on 8 August 1918, the so-called “black day of the German army”, depended crucially on the strictest operational secrecy and dominance of the airspace over the battlefield, just as the Normandy landings did a quarter of a century later.

The seventh lesson is, do not forget—we have heard a bit of this today—why the war was fought in the first place. The war was fought because Prussian militarism and sense of entitlement to invade, overrun and occupy Prussia’s neighbours proved to be something that could be stopped only by force. Again, there are revisionists who say it would have been better if we had just let Germany get on with it and done nothing about it. I would just briefly quote the former Cambridge professor of French history, Professor Robert Tombs, who wrote recently in The Daily Telegraph that “democracy and liberal government would have faced a bleak future. Authoritarian regimes would have been in the driving seat.”

He concluded: “If tomorrow the Russian army marched through Poland and we were faced with the prospect of hostile aircraft based just across the Channel, would we react any differently? Let us hope we never face such a choice as our great-grandparents did.”

The eighth lesson is, do not settle for anything less than unconditional surrender in a conflict of this sort. Germany did not accept that she had been fully and fairly beaten in the field. The myth of the “stab in the back” gave fuel to Hitler’s subsequent evil campaign to say that Germany had not been defeated but betrayed.
The final lesson speaks for itself and requires no elaboration because we have heard it time and again in the present day in this House: do not stint in peacetime on investment in our armed forces—or we will pay a cost thousands of times greater when we fight a war that we might otherwise have deterred and completely avoided.

4.22 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Minister and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) for their introductions to the debate. I also pay tribute to the contribution of my colleague and Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). Other Members will speak at length. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who cannot make it to the debate—he and others are in either Westminster Hall or Committee—would like me to mention the commemorations taking place in Nitshill this weekend.

The eloquence of commemoration is often beset by flurries of grandeur and peppered with words of valour and heroism. Those words are often spoken with full generosity and belief, yet more often than not, speeches are bereft of names, ages and commemoration on a human plane. When spoken, personal commemorations are like stones thrown upon a loch, sending ripples through time itself. Indeed, the greatness of war is the greatness of loss, and only as time passes do we come to understand the profound and unintended historical consequences of those individual losses.

For many, 100 years is an age; for historians, it is a mere moment in time. Yet by its end, the great war had justified its name, at least in our minds. Some 6 million UK troops were mobilised, with a loss of 700,000. It was also a war fought on all fronts: a war of the industrial age on land, at sea and even taking flight to the skies. While some would state that it was an un-won war, there is no doubt that the allied powers in fact forced the Kaiser and his advisers, such as Ludendorff, to accept that surrender was the only way forward for Germany. They, at least at that point in history, recognised that a hopeless struggle to the bitter end would be in no one’s interest.

Some have said that it was the best of times and the worst of times. For one family, I know that it was indeed the worst of times. Far from the front at the age of 24, James Timlin, son of Barbara and Richard and brother to Anne, Bridget, Thomas, Sarah, Maria and Anthony, joined the 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers, in Kilmarnock in that great county of Ayrshire, and undertook a journey that would see him, by the age of 28, travel through the horror of conflict. Little did he know that his great-nephew Sean would join us in the Under-Gallery for this debate; nor could he have known that his sister Sarah and her husband John would settle in Clydebank—the sinking of which shifted opinion in the United States towards supporting the allied powers?

The victory of war was no solace to those lost. It was also a war that saw—I must disagree with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East—a revolution, even in this state, with effective martial law being declared in the great burghs and cities of Scotland. Workers there demanded that at its end, they, and their sons and brothers returning from the frontline, would no longer live and work as they had—in slums, with early death at home and at work. This was also a world in which women would at last rightly demand equality.

By 1939, we had marched blindfolded toward a war that would shake the very foundations of the earth. Fascism, founded on hate, antisemitism, lies, fear and the targeting of the weak, had filled a vacuum in Europe that many would say the League of Nations had allowed, with the failed peace offering a false hope.

This was a war that James Timlin’s sister, Sarah, knew at close quarters, through her two elder sons—one was in the merchant fleet and the other in the RAF—and her husband, who was in the workhouse of the Parkhead forge in neighbouring Glasgow. Those workers were on the frontline, and it is often forgotten that they are the other veterans of war. On 13 and 14 March, hearing the siren along with her younger children, Kathleen, Mary, Irene, Joseph, Patrick and Francis—names are important, for it is individuals, people, who make up the communities we represent—Sarah sheltered from two nights of intense blitzkrieg by the Luftwaffe. As was testified to on the Floor of the House on 15 March 2016, “proportionally, Clydebank lost more people and buildings than any other major community anywhere in the United Kingdom.”—[Official Report, 15 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 928.]

Sarah was lucky. She and her children survived. She lived a long and eventually happy life, but she did not live to see her grandson Ronald, my brother, serve twice, in Iraq and Afghanistan. No doubt she would have known the terror a family feel when their loved ones are on the frontline; the human cost of war was known to Sarah. Her brother, James, born in 1890 in Ballingen, just south of Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland, fell on 29 September 1918 during the third battle of Ypres. He lasted longer than most.
As other hon. Members have said, my constituents and I will soon gather in my constituency—in Clydebank, Dumbarton, Alexandria and the surrounding villages—to commemorate the fallen. War comes about for many reasons, but at the end of it are always the dead, military and civilian. For all our disagreements on these Benches, let us commit again to that word, peace, for without it we live in a world in which democracy cannot flourish.

4.31 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I begin by offering my warmest congratulations to the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State on two very thoughtful and moving speeches in this important debate. I also welcome the new Minister, who will be winding up. I am sure that she will understand if I say that it is with sorrow that I recognise that her predecessor had to resign.

Like a number of colleagues, I am haunted by the first world war. I am of an age to have had to fight a war—I was too young for national service during the cold war—but my father and uncles served in the second world war, as did those of many hon. Members. Members, and both my grandfathers served in the first world war.

I am by training a military historian. I have written books on the British Army in the first world war, and I interviewed dozens of survivors in the 1970s, but the question in my mind is that which my son, aged 27, put to me. He is interested in history, but he said, “Why do we continue to put so much emphasis and effort into commemorating the first world war and the Armistice, which are as far away from my generation as the battle of Waterloo and the Peninsular war were from that generation?” That is a crucial question. As the Secretary of State said, through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, a lot of effort has been put into involving young people—much younger than my son—in understanding what the first world war was about.

I have been privileged to serve on two organisations as a parliamentary representative: the Prime Minister’s advisory committee on commemorating the first world war and, along with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Both of us finish in December. I will have done 10 years. The commission is an amazing organisation, as the shadow Secretary of State said. Formed in 1917 as the Imperial War Graves Commission, it owed its organisation and purpose for the next 20 years to a remarkable man, Fabian Ware. He was not a soldier—he was too old in 1914—but he organised a Red Cross unit that went out to France. In 1915, he was conscious of the question of what would happen to the thousands of men who were killed. In previous battles, that had been limited. Often the private soldiers had merely been dumped in a great pit and, if they were lucky, a single cross had been put over it.

Many wealthier parents, usually of officers, brought their sons home, and, indeed, a number of families tried to do so in 1914, but it was going to be on such a scale that Ware persuaded GHQ in France that another organisation had to be set up. The first was the Graves Registration Commission, which attempted to find out the names and the units of the men who had been killed; and, of course, in thousands of cases, it knew not where their bodies were. As a result of Ware’s determination, the Imperial War Graves Commission obtained its royal charter in 1917, although not without a great deal of opposition on the part of many people who, understandably, wanted to bring their husbands, fathers and sons home. Ware was also determined that there should be absolute equality in terms of the sites in which men were buried: that the aristocrat would lie next to the pauper, and the officer next to the lance corporal.

What we all see today in the gardens of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—which also looks after the men who died in the second world war—is worldwide. The biggest number who are commemorated are not in Belgium and France, but here in the United Kingdom. Those who visit the south coast, by the old hospitals, will see many War Graves Commission cemeteries where lie the men who were brought back wounded from Belgium and France in two world wars, but who then died.

This is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and, as other Members have rightly pointed out, we need to continue to emphasise the role of what we then called the British empire. We did not fight the war on our own. We suffered horrendous casualties, but without the active participation of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the colonies in west Africa and, above all, the Indian empire, we would not have been able to fight the first world war. We went through the motions of recognising how important they had been, but I think that it is only in the past 20 years that we have given them the full recognition that they deserve.

The Australians and New Zealanders have, of course, concentrated on their role at Gallipoli, rather brushing aside the fact that they lost more men in Belgium and France. The Canadians are the unsung heroes of the two world wars. Canada put in so many troops: in the second world war, about a third of the Royal Canadian Navy was fighting the battle of the Atlantic. We could not have fought with our infantry battalions in Normandy and Germany in 1944-45 without what were called “Canloan officers” and non-commissioned officers. So in considering the Armistice, we should bear in mind the role of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and drawing attention to incredibly important matters. May I take the opportunity to say how grateful I am personally for the fact that my own father, who was killed in Normandy in 1944, is buried in one of those cemeteries? May I also take the opportunity to commemorate all those people from my constituency and from the whole of Staffordshire? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) concurs with me in that. I want to commemorate, as we will on Remembrance Day next weekend, the bravery of the people to whom my right hon. Friend has already referred, and I should be most grateful if he would be good enough to accept that as my congratulations to him on a very fine speech.

Mr Simpson: I thank my hon. Friend. He and I have spoken before about the tragic death of his father and about what that meant to him. I am always conscious, as I know we all are, of the impact that losses had in
war, on families but on friends as well. One of the memories in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission archives, which are now being put on its website, is contained in the letters—the desperate letters—that the commission received from relatives trying to find their husbands, sons and brothers who had been killed.

I do not have to remind this House that some of the biggest memorials for which the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible are to those who have no grave: the Menin Gate, Tyne Cot at Passchendaele, Thiepval and quite rightly—I know the Secretary of State mentioned this—the memorials at Portsmouth, Plymouth and London to members of the Royal Navy and the merchant navy who were lost at sea, which at the time must have been totally and utterly devastating.

The Armistice did not end the first world war; the first world war was concluded at the peace conference in 1919, but, as other Members have mentioned, the conflict continued. The British Army was demobilised, but it was maintaining peace and order, as it saw it, in Egypt and Palestine and through the First British Army of the Rhine, and I would argue that the first world war did not really end until 1922 and the Chanak incident when we backed down over Turkey: Lloyd George had backed the Greeks; the coalition Government fell; and the rest is history.

I would like to leave the House with just one quote, if Members will allow an old military historian. I am holding the diary of Brigadier General Jack, which was edited by John Terraine in the early 1960s. Jack was born in 1880 and died in 1962. He was a conservative Scottish officer—a rather shy man. He was 33 in 1914, a platoon commander in the 1st Cameronians, the Scottish Rifles. He survived all that. He became a company commander and then became the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, the Yorkshire Regiment. He was wounded in late 1917 and had nearly four months out of the line. He became a staff officer and was then put back into the line in 1918 to become the commanding officer of the 1st Cameronians, and in September 1918, he was made a brigade commander, commanding about 1,300 men. And off and on, he kept a meticulous diary.

The short quote I want to read out is from 11 November 1918, and it is his final reflections:

“At last I lie down tired and very happy, but sleep is elusive. How far away is that 22nd August 1914, when I heard with a shudder, as a platoon commander at Valenciennes, that real live German troops, armed to the teeth, were close at hand—one has been hardened since then. Incidents flash through the memory: the battles of the first four months; the awful winters in waterlogged trenches; the stupendous victories of the last few months; our shell fire of the next three years; loss of friends, exhaustion and wounds; the stupendous victories of the last few months; our enemies all beaten to their knees.

Thank God! The end of a frightful four years, thirty-four months of them at the front with the infantry, whose company officers, rank and file, together with other front-line units, have suffered bravely, patiently and unselfishly; hardships and perils beyond even the imagination of those, including soldiers, who have not shared them.”

And most of us did not share it either.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am going to bring John Cryer in, but after his speech, I will be setting the time limit at six minutes.
his mother to apply for funds, having lost her husband and their two sons, she was rejected and died in poverty the following year.

This was the same military establishment that was sending men on the Somme uphill in the rain, which Field Marshal Lord Haig argued was not a problem. He said that it was possible to attack heavily armoured German defences by going uphill in the mud and the rain. Personally, I am very proud to wear the poppy every year, but the one thing that stuck in my craw for a long time was that the black centre of the poppy had the words “Haig Fund” written on it. This was a man who sent thousands to their deaths without any good reason, because of his own stupidity and egotism, but that fund was named after him. I always found that a bit odd.

Some Members will have read a book called “The Donkeys” by Alan Clark, the former Conservative MP, who is now, sadly, no longer with us. The right hon. Member for Broadland will certainly have read it. It is quite rare and difficult to get hold of now, but I recommend it to anyone who gets the chance to read it. It is a scathing and contemptuous attack on the British military establishment in Edwardian England. When I was first elected to the House of Commons in 1997, Alan came back having been re-elected as an MP after five years out of Parliament. I remember talking to him about “The Donkeys”, and he said that he had not set out to write a scathing attack on the British military establishment. Indeed, he described himself as a fully paid-up member of the British establishment—he was: he lived in a castle, among other things—but he said that the more research he did into what happened during those four years, the more he became convinced that thousands of lives had been sacrificed unnecessarily.

In fact, that was one of Alan’s motivations for becoming an MP. He was always of the view that the Tory party was the natural party of the working class—[Interruption.] I hear a few “Hear, hears” from Conservative Members, but we on the Labour Benches find that view slightly odd. He felt that that link had been broken in the trenches, and it was his mission to re-establish it. That is a fairly abstruse reason for coming into Parliament, but it was entirely typical of Alan Clark. He never did anything by the book. Anyway, the more he read, the more he discovered that there had been an almost unbelievable degree of incompetence among the British leadership during the first world war. While Alan would not have approved of the sort of revolutionary instincts of some who came back in 1918, 1919 and 1920—demobilisation did not finally play out until 1920—he fully understood, because he said and wrote this, that many of those returning did not want to go back to and support the society that they had lived in before in which people were sacrificed, and their children were sacrificed, for the whisms of their leaders.

4.50 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow all today’s speeches, but I want to pick out and commend the excellent speeches of both Front-Bench spokesmen and the preceding speech from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer). He touched on one of the outcomes of the first world war, talking about the rise of trade unionism. If there were benefits from the war, they were few, but we have also heard about the beginning of the suffrage for women and the gaining of the vote.

I want not only to pay tribute to my constituents who gave their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice, but to say how much I have learned over the past four years since we have been marking the centenary of the first world war. Whatever our generation or background—I was proud to serve as the first female Minister for Veterans at the Ministry of Defence—we have all learned things. Only the other week—perhaps to my shame, but this will be fresh to many—I learned that some 2.5 million Muslims served with the allies, something which has not really been heard of or understood.

I mention my constituents and the sacrifices that many made, but the commemorations in Nottinghamshire did not begin only in 2014. In fact, they go back way before then, and I pay tribute to my constituent Dr David Nunn, who has led eight groups of mostly volunteer historians to create the most remarkable resource on Nottinghamshire County Council’s website. Building on some of the work done by the “Trent to the Trenches” programme, they have created a roll of honour by visiting every single war memorial in the county, looking at every name and then researching each one to create an online picture of all those who fell in the great war.

By way of example, there is John Fowler, whose father was the blacksmith in Trowell. There is Charles Clarke from Awesthorpe, who was killed aged 19. Like many of my constituents at the time, he worked down a pit—he was there at the coalface. Then, of course, there are some even greater heroes who are not on our war memorials. For example, Walter Parker, who earned a Victoria Cross, was not made in Nottinghamshire, but he certainly settled in the town of Stapleford after his great service. He was a marine who served with great distinction in Gallipoli, where he was a volunteer stretcher-bearer, earning his VC while acting with great courage in the face of appalling gunfire.

Like everywhere in the country, Nottinghamshire’s war memorials are numerous. Kimberley’s war memorial was unveiled in 1921 and has just been restored. It was dedicated by the vicar, whose own son was killed in action, and bears 60 names from world war one and, interestingly, 26 names from the second world war. It was in Kimberley in March that I was so proud to join children from a local school in creating a poppy stream, sowing the seeds that then flourished with such beauty in the summer, when we had a freedom parade and the Royal Engineers marched through the town. Unfortunately, Bramcote’s stream of poppies was not so successful. However, it put on a wonderful play, which gave to the children of Bramcote, in particular, an understanding of the lives of the 15 locals who were killed in the first world war.

I have mentioned the role of women in the first world war. We had a shell-filling factory in Broxtowe—the Chetwynd factory—that employed 1,000 people, many of them women. They were called “canary girls” because their skin turned bright yellow due to the chemicals they used. There was a terrible explosion, and it was the biggest loss of life in any explosion during the first world war. The explosion was of such magnitude that not only did 134 people lose their life but its effects were
felt as far away as Beeston, some three to four miles away. We finally opened a proper memorial to them in July, 100 years later:

I have not yet mentioned Greasley, where the war memorial lists a woman, Lilian Holmes, who served in the Women’s RAF.

I conclude with an “in memoriam” that was placed in the Nottingham Post by Elizabeth Chettle. Three of her four sons were killed in the first world war, and she wrote:

“Bitterly oh bitterly we miss them: aching hearts alone can tell: the circle of our home is broken, for why none but God can tell.”

I am proud to say that, all these years later, at least she has a woman MP to read out that fitting tribute to the sacrifice and loss.

4.56 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and to speak in a debate that has already had so many excellent contributions, including from both Front Benchers.

Many people and many organisations have been involved in these commemorations, but I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). He and I have been discussing these commemorations for six years, and I commend him for the excellent job he has done in bringing people together to make the most of this important opportunity. The House, and indeed the country, owes him a great debt of gratitude. I say that because there are few moments in modern society when we come together as a country to reflect on our shared history, and these moments of reflection are not only rare but precious. That is why our commemorations must be inclusive, engaging and respectful, as they have been. This has been a commemoration, not a celebration.

On Armistice Day 1918 the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, announced the end of what was described as the war to end all wars. Today we know that it was not that, but it was the war that changed life in our country forever. The first world war touched every family, affected every community and fundamentally altered our country’s place in the world. It was a conflict that brought profound political, social and economic changes that we still feel today. These centenary commemorations have provided us with a unique opportunity to reflect on that, to pay tribute to those who served and sacrificed 100 years ago and to pass on those memories to future generations.

At the beginning of the commemorations in 2014, I travelled to northern France to retrace the steps taken by the Barnsley Pals battalions. Looking out from the French positions, I tried to imagine what it must have been like for them. It was hard not to be overcome by the emotion of what had happened in that place. I walked the ground over which they had fought, and I stood in front of their graves. It felt like they were a long way from home.

Later that day, I visited the memorial to the missing at Thiepval. As I gazed at the thousands of names inscribed on the memorial, I saw the name D. Jarvis—my own name—staring back at me. It was a sobering moment. I finished the day by visiting the Devonshire cemetery near the village of Mametz. At the end of the first day of the battle of the Somme, over 160 men of the Devonshire Regiment were retrieved from where they had fallen in action. They were carried back to their starting trench positions and buried there. Their comrades from the Devonshires put up a makeshift wooden cross and on it were carved the words, which can still be read at this place:

“The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still.”

This centenary has also given us the opportunity to remember those who contributed on the home front during the war, not just because of the significance of their service, but because this is an important part of the story of how our country changed: the war led to more women in work than ever before; they took on roles that had previously been the preserve only of men; and with an estimated 2 million women entering the workforce, they joined countless individual heroines, such as nurse Edith Cavell and Doctor Elsie Inglis. Our democracy expanded, society became less deferential and the role of the state changed, and our politics would never be the same again.

Britain’s place in the world shifted, and men who had never before been to Britain would come here to defend it. Millions of people from across the Commonwealth served in the British war effort. Some 1.5 million came from the Indian subcontinent alone, fighting side by side with British troops, on land, at sea and in the air. They would, of course, be joined by soldiers from many other countries, including volunteers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the West Indies and parts of Africa. One hundred and seventy-five of those servicemen from overseas would be awarded the Victoria Cross for their courage and gallantry, and we must never forget them and their outstanding service.

As well as looking back, these commemorations should be about looking forward, as they are as relevant to the lives we live today and they will be in the future; 100 years ago nobody had heard of post-traumatic stress disorder, but today the issue is not just what we can do for our veterans returning from the frontline, but how we can prioritise the mental health of everyone. One hundred years ago, people from all over the world fought and died to protect our country, and today we need to remember the debt we owe people who were not born here but who helped to make our country what it is today. One hundred years ago, the first world war changed the role of the state; Government took action on food, rents and wages. That links to one of the central arguments in our public life today: what Governments should and should not do in the 21st century.

A number of us in this place know from personal experience that this was not the war to end all wars; wars continue to scar our world. I hope that in due course we will remember not only those who fell in the service of our country in the first world war, but those who have fallen more recently.

5.2 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Now that I have said about three words, it is obvious that I have dual nationality, so I want to support those who have mentioned the Commonwealth. When Britain is under attack, here or elsewhere, the formidable troops of the Commonwealth nations rally to help. In world war one, some, such as the New Zealanders, came from so far
away that if they had gone any further they would have been going back. For some nations there is a huge kith and kin bond, whereas for others it is predominately the Commonwealth link, with some kith and kin. The second group includes the Caribbean, the Maoris, the Pacific islanders and India—we must bear in mind that India in 1914 included Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. As we are well aware, the kith and kin nations are, in the main, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. My grandparents’ generation in New Zealand and Australia were the world war one generation. I remember them talking fondly of the UK as home, even if they had never been here, unless they came to fight.

In world war one, the troops from those Commonwealth nations were at the forefront, volunteering to fight for Britain. For many of those nations, I found that the figures were unreliable, but millions of Commonwealth men came. Mostly they fought in the Army, but many fought in the Navy, and some in the fledging air forces. Their losses were huge and they were heartbreaking. Again, I found the figures to be unreliable, but one source said that the Canadians lost just over 50% of their troops, the Australians 50% and the New Zealanders about 60%. There is, as has just been mentioned, recognition of their bravery—something in excess of 170 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Commonwealth soldiers.

We in the United Kingdom have Remembrance Sunday. Australia and New Zealand have Anzac Day derived from the appalling Gallipoli battles. Equally, I understand that the Canadian equivalent derives from the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I pay tribute to all those New Zealanders who lie in my constituency on Cannock Chase in Stafford where every year we commemorate Anzac Day in the presence of representatives of the Australian and New Zealand high commissions. It shows how much we value the huge amount that the Australian and New Zealand high commissions. It shows how much we value the huge amount that the Australians, Canadians and indeed all those from around the world did on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Interestingly, in my constituency, we looked after the Canadians.

In Vimy Ridge, 10,500 people died or were wounded. On Remembrance Day here, I attend a service in one of my villages. We always read out the names of the village men who were lost. That was not done when I was a child attending my small New Zealand village service on Anzac Day—there are just too many names to read out at a simple service.

I have spoken about the dead and wounded combatants from the Commonwealth, but we must not forget those who returned to their nations, many of whom were physically damaged and many, many of whom were left with mental nightmares, which we did not understand, but which we have better recognition of now. They tried to return to normality in their Commonwealth lands. Europe owes so much to these men who travelled so far to fight for the allies in a war that technically was not theirs, but Europe’s. They came and I suspect they would come again.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and so many eloquent speeches from the Front Benches of the Government, Her Majesty’s Opposition and the SNP. The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Mr Docherty-Hughes), spoke about port communities and in some of my speech I wish to concentrate on those communities.

As has been said, the great war, world war one, impacted on every community in our country. Every town, village and city was affected. The seafaring communities were very badly affected. Like many others, the seafaring community that I am proud to represent had service personnel in the battlefields, but they also guarded our trade links, which carried people, goods and service personnel during the great war, and indeed in subsequent wars.

The greatest loss of life on the Irish sea during the great war was on 10 October 1918, when the RMS Leinster left Dún Laoghaire, then Kingstown, carrying His Royal Highness’s mail to Holyhead in my constituency and was sunk just a few yards from the port of Dún Laoghaire. Among those who perished were children, crew members and service personnel from the Commonwealth—from New Zealand, Australia and Canada—and from the United States of America.

That vessel was carrying out its normal duty of moving people and the royal mail across the Irish sea. Many of the 500 who died had been just carrying out their normal duties; they were seafarers. They were given an exemption from going to war because of the essential duties that they carried out, keeping our sea links open. The tragedy unites the Irish community, the British community and the Welsh community. I am proud today to wear poppies from Ireland and Wales. On 10 October, we had a special commemoration in Ireland and Wales for the loss of those 500 people, and I met their families. It is right that Members have spoken about survivors and the families of the survivors, because those communities and families have been scarred by the great war. It was a tragedy.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Like my hon. Friend’s constituency, communities in Coventry also made contributions in the great war. As he and the House will know, Coventry suffered in two world wars and was bombed in the second world war. The people of Coventry sympathise with his remarks about the sacrifice that was made.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Like my hon. Friend’s constituency, communities in Coventry also made contributions in the great war. As he and the House will know, Coventry suffered in two world wars and was bombed in the second world war. The people of Coventry sympathise with his remarks about the sacrifice that was made.

Albert Owen: I know a lot about Coventry. My son-in-law comes from Coventry, as my hon. Friend knows; I think that he was his MP for some time. My speech is concentrating on the families of seafaring communities. I welcome the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) mentioning that many were lost at sea, so their bodies were never recovered and there were no proper funerals to honour them.

A lot of hon. Members have rightly spoken about the personal experiences of their own families. My grandmother was born in 1888. As a single parent who had lost her husband to disease, she became a nurse and worked in the hospital. She was at the port of Holyhead during the great war. Many people came to her with severe shellshock, including her youngest brother, who did not recognise her for two years because of the trauma that
he suffered on the battlefields. It is worth bearing it in mind that many mothers and other family members had such experiences.

The other stark memory that I am sure we all have after seeing first world war graves is the age of those who died. Many who suffered were young men and boys; I do not know the exact average age, but these men were in their 20s. Their parents will never have forgotten that throughout their lives. My grandmother’s son—my father—served in the second world war, and he always told me that every day that he was away was a dark day until he returned home safely.

One hundred years after the guns fell silent, the House of Commons is right to remember our communities, and those who sailed across the Irish sea and around the coastline. The RMS Leinster reminded me that vulnerable people were shot by U-boats. Going to sea—I speak as an ex-merchant seafarer who worked on that route—is dangerous enough. Crew members look after each other, but imagine being faced with the potential of being sunk by a U-boat, as cruelly happened to the RMS Leinster. The irony of that story is that the German submarine UB-123 was itself shot and blown up on the north coast of Britain as it went back to Bremerhaven.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) is right that we must also respect the bravery of our opponents because they carried out their duties. It is hugely appropriate—I give the Government credit for this—that the German President is attending ceremonies this year, because we want to look forward as a nation.

Our forefathers made the pledge in 1918 that we would remember those who died, and we are honouring that pledge today, as we have done over the years. As an ex-seafarer representing a proud seafaring community, I will be proud to stand up on 11 November and say to all those people and their families, “We will remember them; we will remember.”

5.13 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow so many moving and erudite speeches.

War is a ghastly failure of all other possible negotiation methods to resolve disputes over territory and resources. As a mother, alongside every other mother since time began, the prospect of war makes me feel sick to my stomach; the prospect of our children, of those we love and are responsible for, having to put their lives on the line—a brutal and sometimes fatal last line—to defend our values and population. War goes against every possible mother’s instinct, except of course the most profound one—that every mother would give up her own life for her children’s to be saved. But in times of war, it cannot work out like that.

A hundred years ago, mothers across our country and around the world were mourning the loss of millions of young men who had gone to war in far-flung trenches, hundreds of miles from their homes, to places they had never heard of and could not pronounce, in support of their Government’s call to stand against an enemy trying to destroy a neighbour’s way of life and identity.

This was brought home to me four years ago when my children and I visited the Somme and a number of those fateful battlefields, and went to a place called Ocean Villas—or so I thought—to explore a series of real trenches unearthed by a British lady who had retired to the area and found them in her back garden. On arrival, I realised, as a French speaker, that the name of the village is Auchonvillers, which, if you say it in an English accent, sounds like Ocean Villas. It sounds like a rather lovely place when you say it like that, but it is very far from the ocean and the view would have been unimaginably different from a pleasant sea view. So as young men in 1914 headed over the sea to northern France and elsewhere, mothers waited at home for news of their boys, willing them to make it back home, broken perhaps, but alive, rather than buried in far-flung fields.

In the far western part of my constituency is a large area of high moorland territory known as Otterburn Ranges. It is one of the Army’s largest training areas for young soldiers and cadets, and in the heart of this training area are some of Britain’s best-preserved world war one trenches. Hundreds of trenches were dug in Britain by some of the 1 million men who volunteered in 1914, as a way of preparing them for warfare.

From Northumberland went thousands of young men, many of them joining up to go to war as members of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. The regiment raised 52 battalions, with 29 of them serving overseas. It was awarded 67 battle honours and five Victoria Crosses, losing 16,000 men during the war. It had ever been the case that soldiers who die in battle are buried where they fall, and for all those mothers and wives whose menfolk never returned, the loss was compounded by the inability to say goodbye or to find any peace in their bereavement by visiting their graves. So the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the years that followed the war to end all wars, and the slaughter of a generation of young men, to help those who remained to learn to cope, is extraordinary. I thank all those across the world who care for them.

Some of Northumberland’s young men, however, went further afield than Alnwick to join the Fusiliers and headed to the sea, to Tyneside, to join the Royal Navy—or, indeed, to join the Submarine Service. It is of those young men—the submariners—and the maverick, unconventional and challenging new part of the Royal Navy’s fleet of weaponry that I want to speak for just a few moments. The Submarine Service is often referred to as the silent service, because of course a submarine can sneak up on an enemy unheard and unseen, and because we never really talk about the incredibly dangerous work that it does.

In the early 20th century, submarines were considered somewhat shocking—not really sporting—by our own naval chiefs, but a few who understood their military potential for advantage quietly got on with building these strange underwater tubes; or, as one modern-day submariner described it to me, a caravan with no windows with a gang of friends in it, and you have no idea where you are. Modern-day submarines are highly technical, very expensive bits of kit, some more complex than a space station, but back in 1914 they were simpler and less safe, and the chances of survival as a submariner were very low. If a submarine was hit or had mechanical failure, it nearly always ended up at the bottom of the sea: a cruel and brutal death, and for the whole crew. The technology moved fast as the Germans built up their U-boat fleet and demonstrated how they could...
sink our ships, so the Royal Navy encouraged more use of this maverick weapon, with the support of the then First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill.

A young lieutenant commander, Max Horton, said to have been an aggressive and self-confident gunning man, daring by nature—we do not get those these days, somehow, in the world of peace and safety that we can enjoy—took on the challenge of demonstrating the power of the submarine. He later became an admiral and commander-in-chief of the Western Approaches in the second world war, responsible for the battle of the Atlantic. But back in 1914, Horton and those young Northumbrians who had joined up were living in inhuma conditions in those early submarines. We might consider today that their work was guerrilla warfare. Both our submarines and, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned, German U-boats targeted enemy military surface fleets, and both took hits. In fact, out of 17,000 German men who served in submarines, more than 5,100 lost their lives. Serving on a submarine was, without doubt, one of the most dangerous occupations of that entire war.

We read the historical records about the battalions and their battles; the bravest young men with battle honours; statistics and events; moments of critical importance in those battles; and leaders’ decisions made always with imperfect information, some leading to victory, some not. But human conflict was always the ultimate consequence. Armistice—that moment when a cessation of hostilities is agreed by all parties; the start of the negotiations to find a solution for a lasting cessation of hostilities is agreed by all parties; the start of the negotiations to find a solution for a lasting peace—has to be the moment that we must celebrate and remember that every mother always has to carry this burden.

5.19 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State on their excellent opening speeches?

My constituency office is in the Fulforth community centre, in a small pit village called Sacriston. In the entrance to the community centre is a war memorial that was rescued from the memorial hall, which was pulled down several years ago. On that beautiful mahogany memorial, inlaid with gold lettering, are the names of 122 men just from Sacriston and the surrounding area—it is a very small area—who lost their lives in the first world war. This Sunday, the local community will plant 122 crosses and a few more, because some people are not on the memorial, in the garden of remembrance next to the community centre, and I congratulate the community on doing that. I know that similar ceremonies will take place throughout the nation.

The individuals marked and remembered on that memorial were sons, brothers and husbands. When I look at their names, I think of the sacrifice that they made for this country, but I also remember that their ambitions and dreams were unfulfilled, and their loved ones left behind were worrying and thinking about what could have been.

There was an outpouring of remembrance after the Armistice. Throughout the nation, memorials such as the one in Sacriston were built, as well as clocks, parks and memorial halls. I live across the road from the Pelton Fell Memorial Park, which was dedicated to those who lost their lives in the first world war, with the money raised by local miners and the mine company.

Those are physical memorials, but I would like to join the Secretary of State in congratulating the Heritage Lottery Fund. Over the last four years, it has allowed local communities to bring to life the stories behind some of the casualties and tell the wider story of the effects of the first world war. I had the privilege last week of going to the exhibition it has funded, where I met two young ladies from North Durham, Jade Hay and Caitlin Dobby. They had worked on a project that told the story of what happened to children who lost their fathers during the first world war, and, in some cases, their mothers to Spanish flu after the war. They were horrendous stories of children committed to industrial schools or transported to Australia and Canada—stories never told before. Their only crime was that they were poor, but society just left them. It is thanks to the HLF funding for the project that a spotlight has been shone on that human face, not on the battlefield, but on the home front.

The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) and I have had the privilege of being Commonwealth War Graves Commissioners. I have been a commissioner for the last eight years; unfortunately, all good things come to an end, and that will end in December this year. He explained how the commission came into being. Like many great things in this country, it came into being by accident. Today the commission is held in high esteem, but it was not just after the first world war. At the time, some argued that we should repatriate the dead and that people should be able to put up their own memorials and crosses. It was a hugely controversial event but, thankfully, the commission saw through and became the great organisation it is today.

The commission commemorates the dead of the first and second world wars in 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries. I want to thank the staff of the commission and the partner nations that have contributed—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India—and make it all possible. It has been a great privilege working with them.

May I say to right hon. and hon. Members that, while they should remember the great iconic sites in France, they should also visit their local cemeteries? We have over 300,000 casualties in cemeteries in this country, and if they can visit them, they should do so. We have an ongoing project to put up signs to commemorate them. They should give recognition to the sites that we in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission look after in their local communities.

In finishing, let me say that remembrance is important not just in remembering the sacrifice that individuals made, but, as was eloquently put forward by both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, in learning some of the lessons for the future.

5.25 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Some full tributes have been paid this afternoon, and I add mine to them. In particular, I pay tribute to the civil servants who have worked tirelessly throughout this centenary period, and to colleagues, who have been unstinting in their advice; perhaps I can single out the
hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for all his wise counsel over the six years that we have been debating these matters.

My fullest tribute is to the public, because they have made this centenary. Their appetite for this was unknown when we started on this journey seven years ago, but it has exceeded all our expectations. The centenary has been a tonic in a rather shoddy and cynical age, and the public’s maturity and reflectiveness have shown through. Throughout, there has of course been pride, yes; but jingoism, no. I have been enormously proud of them.

When the President of Germany lays his tribute at the Cenotaph in a few days’ time, it will not be an act of reconciliation. The people of our two countries are well beyond that now. It will be the solace of a friend, and of an equal in all the acts of remembrance that we will carry out on Sunday, when we look to the future while respecting the past.

Two small villages in my constituency, Upton Scudamore and Chicklade, last month unveiled new memorials to villagers—ordinary men who had been forgotten for decades, and are now remembered. When we commemorate events of this sort, we very often remember the great men—generals and politicians—and perhaps less so the ordinary men, but society is the poorer for the loss of them. They are men such as Private Fred Barnes, Bombardier William Beak, Private Job Daniels, Private William Hinton and 19-year-old Serjeant Albert Greenland MM—military medal. Now, after a gap of 100 years, they are memorialised in the village of Upton Scudamore, overlooking Salisbury plain. Stalin is alleged to have said that one death is a tragedy, but 1 million deaths is a statistic. Interestingly, Mother Teresa said more or less the same thing from the opposite end of the moral spectrum. Reflecting on those five ordinary men, we begin to understand what those two individuals were thinking of.

Of all the projects and initiatives throughout the past five years, it is invidious to pick out any, but I will pick out two. One of the most striking was backed by the Government, was called the Unremembered, about which I wrote to colleagues in the summer. Its poster boy is the remarkable Lieutenant Walter Tull, a footballer and black Army officer. He was a truly inspirational individual whom the centenary has taken from obscurity and respect for the past. The people of our two countries are well beyond that now. It will be the solace of a friend, and of an equal in all the acts of remembrance that we will carry out on Sunday, when we look to the future while respecting the past.

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of our understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, and for modern mental health practice and medicine. At the time, the *British Medical Journal* described the treatment at Moss Side, which is recognisable today, as “suggestion, persuasion, therapeutic conversations, re-education. The physician masters the patients, gains his confidence and analyses his troubles and morbid ideas and sets his mind at rest.” This was the forerunner of both cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR, which, for those of us who have not come across it before, is eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing. We can trace their origins straight back to the work done 100 or so years ago at Moss Side.

At the same time that treatment was starting at Maghull, soldiers who were ill were being executed. Arbitrary decisions were taken about whether a man was suffering from shellshock and should be sent for treatment, or should be deemed a coward, convicted and sentenced to death. There is no adequate explanation for the gross injustice suffered by those labelled cowards and shot at dawn in world war one.

Take the case of Private Jimmy Smith of the Liverpool Pals. Jimmy survived Gallipoli. He was decorated at the Somme, where he was seriously injured, but he was forced to return to duty on the frontline, despite clearly suffering from shellshock. He was found guilty at court martial after going absent without leave, and sentenced to death by firing squad. The officer in charge ordered Jimmy’s friend to fire the fatal shot after Jimmy was only wounded by the firing squad, most of whom deliberately missed because they did not agree with the sentence. They knew Jimmy was not a man lacking in moral fibre.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East mentioned, 306 men were shot for cowardice, and he spoke of his role in achieving the pardon of those 306. I am very pleased that he did so, and that the Labour Government gave that recognition to those men. The military cemetery at Kemmel Chateau, where Jimmy is buried, has the inscription, “Gone but not forgotten”. How appropriate for him and for all the 306.

Today, veterans are still suffering. In my constituency, veterans, and for everyone else.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you very much for allowing me to participate in this important debate, in which we have heard excellent Back-Bench and Front-Bench contributions in commemoration of all those who gave their life in that epic conflict which became the first world war. Although I do not come from a military family per se, my father Reginald Francois fought in the second war, on a minesweeper at D-day, and my grandfather Matthew John Francois served in the first war in the Rifle Brigade, joining up in his 30s. He lost his leg as a casualty.

The first world war massively influenced the development of this country in social, economic, military and political terms, but I would like to focus on another area in which it greatly influenced this country: our cultural history. The first world war has been depicted in many art forms, not least in film. Famous movies such as “Oh! What a Lovely War”, “All Quiet on the Western Front”, “Gallipoli” and, more recently, “War Horse” have given us vivid depictions, both satirical and brutally realistic, of life in the trenches. There have also been books and plays of many kinds; “Birdsong” and “Journey’s End” are two that spring readily to mind.

However, some of the most evocative memories from the first world war are brought to us by the soldiers who became known as the war poets. These were young men, mainly—although not exclusively—from English public schools, who served as junior officers or in other ranks, predominantly on the western front. One of the earlier, arguably more optimistic, war poets, Rupert Brooke, was born on 3 August 1887, the son of a housemaster at Rugby School. Educated at Rugby and then King’s College, Cambridge, he was commissioned into the Royal Naval Division in 1914, before being redeployed to Gallipoli in March 1915, where he became fatally ill and died of blood poisoning that April. However, while on leave in December 1914, Brooke wrote his five war sonnets, of which the most famous is undoubtedly “The Soldier”.

“If I should die think only this of me: That there’s some corner of a foreign field That is forever England. There shall be In that rich earth a richer dust concealed: A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam; A body of England’s, breathing England air, Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. And think, this heart, all evil shed away, A pulse in the eternal mind, no less Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given; Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness, In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.”

As the war progressed, the mood of the war poets changed. In Siegfried Sassoon’s “The General”, he expresses great scorn for those who gave the orders that led men to die. In the latter stages of the war came Wilfrid Owen, who was born on 18 March 1893, the son of a former mayor who had fallen on hard times. He never attended university, but in 1916 he was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment. In 1917, Owen wrote arguably the most famous of all the war poems, “Dulce et Decorum Est”. The final verse refers to a casualty:

“If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes wrinkling in his face, His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the foth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,— My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.”
Contrary to the “Blackadder” theory of world war one—of senseless slaughter in the trenches, with no gains by either side—in the summer and autumn of 1918 the British Army did get it right. It breached the impenetrable Hindenburg line and broke the back of the German army. Using new tactics of combined arms, short and sudden artillery bombardments and the mass use of tanks, the British Army comprehensively defeated the Germans in the field and brought about the Armistice.

By a great irony, Wilfred Owen was awarded the Military Cross in October 1918, and on 4 November, just one week before the Armistice, he was killed leading his platoon in an assault on the Sambre-Oise canal.

The great writings of these men live on today to remind us of the horror of war, and of trench warfare in particular. We must never forget the sacrifices that were made so that we can continue to live in a free country. Let us remember.

5.43 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I want to speak about two men who never came home from the great war: my great uncle Oliver Williams Benn and George Edwin Ellison.

Oliver was little spoken of in our family when I was growing up, I suspect because the pain of his loss was still too raw despite the passing of the years. What we do know about him now is, thanks to my son James, who wrote a book about his life. He was commissioned into the Somerset Light Infantry and arrived in Gallipoli on 26 May 1915, landing on W beach at Cape Helles, where he was posted to the 1st Battalion the Essex Regiment. Ten days later, on 6 June, he was posted missing after the third battle of Krithia. The family desperately searched for news in the hope that he had been captured. His mother wrote to him regularly, but gradually hope faded and at the end of the war all her letters were returned unopened.

A few summers ago, we retraced Oliver’s journey from the beach to the place where he died. The trenches, their edges softened by the years, are still visible in the woods, but the site of trench H12, where he was last seen, is now a field of sunflowers. As we stood there in the burning midday sun, my son James read from Oliver’s last letter to his mother, in which he wrote:

“Good-bye mother darling… Please don’t worry… All my best love, your very happy boy, Nol.”—

Nol was the family nickname for him. His body was never found and he is one of over 20,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers whose names are inscribed on the Helles memorial. He was 27 years old.

George Edwin Ellison lived in Leeds and joined the 5th Royal Irish Lancers at the outbreak of war. He fought at the battle of Mons in 1914 and in the years that followed, at Loos, Ypres and Cambrai, before returning to Mons on 11 November 1918, when, while scouting in the woods on horseback, he was shot and killed by a sniper—a “goodnight kiss”, in the slang. It was around 9.30 in the morning, an hour and a half before the Armistice. George Ellison was 40 years old. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) reminded us in his magnificent speech—as was the speech of the Secretary of State—he was the last British soldier to lose his life in battle in the great war, and he rests in the St Symphorien cemetery, as beautiful in its own way as the field of sunflowers in Gallipoli. How quickly nature covers up the horror of war.

Whether by design or fate, George Ellison’s grave is just a few footsteps across the grass, as we heard, from the resting place of the first British soldier to die in action on the western front, John Parr, who was with the 4th Battalion the Middlesex Regiment. He was just 17 years of age. The first and the last, and in between them in time, if not in place, lie the millions who gave their lives in the war that was meant to end all wars, but did not.

Philip Parker wrote this poem inspired by the life and death of George Ellison and John Parr. It is part of “The Centenary Collection” of Armistice poems, produced in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum by a group of writers known simply as 26. Each poem is exactly 100 words. It is entitled “Goodnight Kiss”:

“Five strides apart, five summers past, I saluted you and the old sweats riding to War.

I fell first. And waited: while you mined the frozen mud. Ducked into crump holes. Pinched lice from your seams. Felt the pear drops’ sting at Wipers.”—

“You drink Hannah’s words from home; Jimmy’s walking now.

Then you’re following the tank tracks from Cambrai. The chase draws you to Mons, where your War began. In the woods on the eleventh day, a goodnight kiss. Ninety minutes to Armistice.

My wait ends. First and last in a bunker for pals, we lie five strides apart.”

May those who fell forever rest in peace as we who are left resolve always to remember them.

5.48 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought the speech by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) was very touching; I thank him for giving it.

I want to talk about an incident in my life that connected me to the first world war. On Friday 17 December 1982 at St George’s church, Stockport, I attended the funeral of a young soldier from my company who had been killed in Northern Ireland. Sadly, it was the sixth funeral that I had attended that week; all were for men from my company—the company I was commanding was A Company of the 1st Cheshire. In all, 11 soldiers and six civilians—five of them young women, one of whom died in my arms—were killed by an Irish National Liberation Army bomb on Monday 6 December at Ballykelly, County Londonderry.

As I came out of St George’s, a very old lady was weeping quietly on the far side of the road. I had not noticed her in the funeral, but she might have been there. I crossed the road and spoke to her. I think I said, “The soldier is out of his pain now, you know.” She looked up at me and replied, “You don’t understand.”

To be honest, I was somewhat irked by that comment, as I was with my soldier when he died and I was grieving, too. I must have shown unworthy irritation to her, because she said, “No, you really don’t understand.” I remember asking her why, and she said something like, “When I was a young girl, I stood where I am now and watched 800 young local boys of the 6th Cheshires go into that church. I knew many of them. That must have been in 1915. They went off to the war. When they came back home there were only enough of them to fill three pews in that church.”

That brought me up short. That lady was recalling hundreds of boys who certainly did not want to die in battle—battles such as the Somme, where, as we all...
recall, 19,240 of our soldiers died on the first day alone. Those soldiers had very little choice. Of course, we must remember them, but personally I always remember everyone, soldiers and civilians, killed in conflict, and right now I am remembering every day the soldiers, the girls and the one boy killed at Ballykelly on 6 December 1982.

5.52 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a huge responsibility to follow the last two extraordinary speeches from my friend the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I think that everyone in the Chamber was touched by both.

We use the phrase very easily, but it is a genuine privilege to take part in this debate and to pay tribute to all those who serve and have served and especially to the memory of all those who fought in the great war of 1914-18 and their families. For the first time in history, an entire generation was touched by the horrors of war. One hundred years on, there are still no words to articulate the sacrifice they made or the debt we owe. There can be no tributes to meet the measure of the price paid, lives lost or impact on our society.

In the spirit of honour and remembrance, however, we try as best we can. As we approach the centenary of the Armistice, it has been awe-inspiring to see the outpouring of support and commemoration across the country, especially in my own constituency. I recently had the great pleasure of visiting the Weeping Window installation at Middleport pottery, installed in the heart of my constituency. As well as being a powerful and beautiful commemoration of our fallen heroes, the ceramic poppies that cascaded from our bottle kiln served as a beautiful tribute to our own city’s heritage and craftsmanship.

These commemorations convey so clearly and so movingly the Potteries’ wartime history and the people of our community who lived in the shadow of war. North Staffordshire has a proud military tradition, past and present, and my constituency is home to many service families, for whom this season of remembrance holds a deep importance. I am sure I speak for everyone in this place when I say to them: thank you. Thank you for what you have done for our country and for the sacrifices you have made in our defence.

In each of the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent and the villages and communities in between, our permanent memorials have been joined by other tributes as our community comes together to pay our respects. One example is the brilliant There But Not There project, which was honoured in the recent Budget. It is an art installation whose aim is to put figures representing every name on local war memorials in the places around the country where their absence was felt, whether in schools, workplaces or places of worship. From St John’s Church in Burslem and its beautiful poppy display to Milton parish church, where parishioners have knitted more than 3,000 poppies to adorn their building, local people are doing their part to mark this historic occasion.

As part of the Stoke-on-Trent Remembers campaign, a series of silhouettes—made and designed locally by Andy Edward and PM Training—has been installed in each of the six towns. The 8-foot-high steel figures depict a real account of a local person’s experiences of war. There are stories such as that of Corporal A. P. Oakes, of Scotia Road, Burslem and the 1st Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment, who was present for the Christmas Day truce at Flanders in 1914. In his diaries, Corporal Oakes described his experience of that all too brief moment of humanity between the trenches:

“Our chaps started to shout across good humouredly, and the Germans replied in the same spirit. Then both sides got on top of their respective trenches, and one man from both sides met half way. Then peace on earth, good will to all men! was the order of the day, or rather the night... They all seemed anxious for a speedy termination of the war and one fellow made us all laugh by saying that both sides should stand back-to-back and advance.”

Across our community, there have been so many wonderful stories of commemoration. I was particularly struck this week by news that a quilt embroidered by 60 soldiers who had been recovering at the Stoke War Hospital had been rediscovered more than 100 years after it had been stitched. The quilt had previously been unveiled at Newcastle-under-Lyme’s municipal hall in 1917, and raffled to raise funds for the hospital. It is a beautiful and touching reminder of the hardships that so many faced in those years. I hope that that beautiful quilt will end up alongside the recently found “Bayeux tapestry” of world war one, painted in 1923 by members of the 5th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment to remember 960 of their fallen comrades. It is now on display at the Potteries Museum in the constituency of my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell).

It would take far more time than I have today to offer a full account of North Staffordshire’s contributions to the war effort. Undoubtedly, such a history would include the likes of Corporal Albert Ernest Egerton, a Pottery soldier with the Sherwood Foresters, who earned the Victoria Cross during the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge on 20 September 1917. Corporal Egerton single-handedly charged a machine gun nest, shooting three German gunners, and forced the surrender of 29 enemy soldiers. His comrades in that assault included another Stoke-on-Trent soldier, Sergeant Major E. Kelly, who led a charge in which four machine guns were taken out of action and 30 enemy troops captured. He received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions.

These were incredible acts of heroism, but such acts were repeated a thousandfold by so many men, from the Potteries and beyond, who risked, and so often lost, their lives in the defence of their country and of the men serving beside them. These were the extraordinary deeds of ordinary people.

Mr Francois: Does the hon. Lady agree that as she has two pages left and only 15 seconds, an intervention would come in handy?

Ruth Smeeth: The right hon. Gentleman is a good man.

This Sunday, one century on, we will honour and remember those people. We will remember, too, all those who have lost their lives in all the conflicts since and pay our respects to today’s serving and veteran armed forces personnel. However, as chair of the all-party
parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I am all too aware that we owe much more than respect. We owe a duty of care to those who continue to serve in our military. That means ensuring that the armed forces covenant is really delivering and that our service personnel are getting the support that they need. It also means supporting local groups such as the brilliant Staffordshire Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre, so that they can continue to work to support veterans.

At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, we will remember them. But we must ensure that our history informs our present and that our commemoration of those who have gone is matched by our commitment to those who remain.

5.59 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and all who have spoken.

I want to concentrate on a theme that was brought up by I cannot remember which Front Bencher: how we will remember them. I want to give three examples from my own past of how I have participated in these acts of remembrance.

Ten years ago, before I came into this House, I used to conduct a choir, and I decided on one occasion that it would be a great thing to take that choir to Ypres. The choir consisted both of young children and a 90-year-old lady—who could still sing, I should say—whose brother had fallen in the trenches at the battle of Ypres. It was a wonder to see her wandering among the trenches. We sang choral evensong in the Anglican chapel at Ypres, which was a wonderful experience. Then we went to sing under the Menin Gate. I had been asked to do something different—they were used to the usual Anglican repertoire—so I decided to do an arrangement of the negro spiritual “Steal Away”. As we were finishing that, we got quieter and quieter as the verses went on, and at the end of that rendition the only thing that could be heard under the Menin Gate was the sobbing of those who had been listening and remembering. To this very day, people who went on that trip cannot recall it without tears coming to their eyes as they remember the experience they had.

My second experience is with the town of Thame, which started a project a couple of years ago to lay a Thame cross—it is like the cross of Lorraine—on the grave of every soldier killed in acts of conflict since the first world war. The people of Thame have done this, and that has included marine graves, where they have sent divers down to place the cross on the grave. So far over 300 people have travelled 150,000 miles to lay a cross on the graves of 212 people who lost their lives.

I was very privileged to be able to do this for Second Lieutenant Richard Hewer, who had fought in the battle of Jaffa and was observing for the infantry at the attack on Jerusalem when he was killed. His body lies in the cemetery in Jerusalem, and I went to it and laid the cross on his grave. And I pay tribute to those who look after our cemeteries; the cemetery is absolutely immaculate, and that made the experience of going there to lay this cross all the more telling and emotional.

The third experience involves a gentleman from my constituency called Mike Willoughby, who has over many years undertaken a project called “Bringing them Home” in which he has set out the lives of 298 soldiers who were killed or who died between 1914 and 1921. That has resulted in a number of memorials, and I was privileged to go to the Townlands Memorial Hospital, named after the first world war, only recently and see a memorial unveiled by the lord lieutenant for Oxfordshire. That, too, was a very moving experience, as we read the names on the brass plaque that had been produced there.

Earlier in this debate, many institutions were mentioned as playing a part in keeping the peace in Europe since the end of the second world war, and I would like to mention one that was not mentioned, because I think it has played a phenomenal part in that process: the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is not part of the EU; in terms of its membership it is almost twice the size of the EU, and although it was set up with a human rights focus in its initial creation and it looks after the European Court of Human Rights—the only court in Europe to which we elect the judges ourselves—it goes far beyond that.

If anyone is looking for an organisation that, alongside NATO, has helped to keep the peace in Europe over this time, they need look no further than the Council of Europe. I sincerely hope that it will rise to the challenge again in the future. It is unusual in having both the Israelis and the Palestinians on it, but it has not yet made a great effort to try to get them to engage in peacemaking rather than simply standing up and posing their usual views when they speak.

In giving the House those three examples, and setting out the importance of the Council of Europe, I hope I have demonstrated that I attach a great deal of importance to remembrance.

6.5 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, with many touching and enlightening contributions. This is a moment when Parliament rises to the occasion and speaks for all the people of Britain and beyond.

In the limited time that I have, I want to highlight the role of all the women and men from the far-flung parts of our globe, in addition to those from the UK, in the first world war, whose contribution often seems forgotten or understated in modern-day Britain. That may sound controversial, but even in the arts and culture, in our war movies, there is a palpable lack of black and brown faces. For some, it almost seems as though they were not there. This omission, or lesser emphasis, is a mistake, and I feel that it is one of the reasons why we as a nation are unable to effectively counter the rise of the far right, which seeks to divide us and to sow the seeds of suspicion and hatred.

Many thousands who gave their lives were cremated and hundreds of thousand lie at peace in Commonwealth war graves in 150 countries. Thousands of troops from across the mighty continent of Africa lost their lives, and 166 were decorated in recognition of their valour. The British West Indies Regiment, which provided 15,000 troops, fought in France and won 81 medals and 51 mentions in dispatches. The Canadians who fought at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele earned a fearsome reputation among the enemy on the western front. The Australians and New Zealanders suffered disproportionately huge losses fighting alongside the
French and British on the western front, in Mesopotamia, in Palestine and in the fateful Gallipoli campaign in 1915.

Then we come to the contribution from the Indian subcontinent. More than 1.5 million people came from what is modern-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and they were overwhelmingly volunteers. This was the largest volunteer army in history, and it contained Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others. Khudadad Khan, the first Indian soldier to win the Victoria Cross, for heroism in Flanders in 1914, was followed not many weeks later by Darwan Singh Negi, who was also awarded the VC. The House will note from their names that the first of them was a Muslim and the second was a Sikh. It would be remiss of me, as the first ever turbaned Sikh in our Parliament, not to dwell on the incredible gallantry of serving Sikh soldiers and the contribution that they have made.

Sikhs made up just over 2% of pre-division India, but 20% of the Indian army in world war one. The Sikhs are rightly proud of their distinct heritage and their rich military tradition, which dates back centuries and was demonstrated on many occasions during the great war. More than 83,000 turbaned Sikh soldiers laid down their lives, and more than 100,000 were injured, during both world wars. We are so proud of our forefathers who fought so bravely, and every family has its story to tell, including mine.

In the first months of the war, some Sikh soldiers even refused to take shelter in the trenches because they felt that this suggested cowardice, but where is their monument in our capital city? The National Sikh War Memorial Trust, of which I am president, has campaigned for a memorial in a prime central London location, and many hon. and right hon. Members have signed our early-day motion, including all the leaders of the parliamentary Opposition parties and the Mayor of London. The EDM has been signed by 266 Members—the highest number for many years—and I encourage those who have not yet signed it to do so. I also encourage people to sign the online petition, launched in December 2017, which already has more than 46,000 signatures.

At the parliamentary launch of the campaign for a national Sikh war memorial, a staggering £375,000 was pledged by 15 generous donors. I place on the record my immense gratitude to you, Mr Speaker, for agreeing to our humble request that you preside over the launch. The fact that you took over one and a half hours out of your busy diary and made stirring introductory and closing speeches was not lost on the global Sikh community.

The Government have since pledged their support, for which I thank them, and I am sure that they will impress upon Westminster City Council the need for a prominent location. It would be fitting if we could have a statue of two turbaned Sikh soldiers representing the contribution of Sikhs in each world war. I believe it should be close to Parliament and a place where little Sikh boys and girls can see a representation of turbaned soldiers and feel a deep connection to their history. It should symbolise our unity, our diversity and our integration.

In the first world war, soldiers, sailors and airmen came from every faith and background. The allied armies were racially, religiously and ethnically diverse—just like modern-day Britain. If anything, those armies are a true representation of modern-day Britain, and that is why we will remember them.

6.11 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a real privilege to speak in this debate and to follow such wonderful, heartfelt speeches.

H. G. Wells, who attended school for a time at Midhurst in my constituency, described the great war as the war that will end all wars. However, the fact that we refer today to the first world war shows that his belief was sadly misplaced. Only two decades after the war to end all wars, the world was again plunged into conflict, with millions of British and Commonwealth soldiers slain on faraway battlefields after fighting, for a second time, for the survival of our democratic institutions, our freedom and our liberty.

Not far from H. G. Wells’ school is a village called East Wittering. It was the only parish in Sussex not to lose a single soldier during the great war. Just 53 parishes in the country can claim that and together they make up the thankful villages. More than 16,000 villages across Britain were not as fortunate as the 53. The names of the 6,800 servicemen from the Royal Sussex Regiment who gave their lives are fittingly inscribed on the regimental walls in Chichester cathedral, which also commemorates the 351 soldiers from the Chichester district who gave their lives. Soldiers died in lands they had only heard of in books so we can stand here today as free men and women. Private Samuel White was born in Chichester. He enlisted in Brighton and is now buried in Jerusalem’s war cemetery after being assassinated by a sniper in 1917. Private William Turner, also born in Chichester, drowned in the battlecruiser HMS Queen Mary, which was sunk in the North sea during the battle of Jutland in 1916. He was just 20 years old.

For many like William, their final resting place is on the ocean floor. The ships they once served on are now their coffins. It is for that reason that I welcome the work of organisations such as the Maritime Archaeology Trust, which raises awareness of the forgotten shipwrecks of the first world war along our coastline. Thanks to Heritage Lottery Fund money set aside to mark the centenary of the Armistice, the trust’s online interactive map serves as a poignant reminder of not only the sheer volume of ships that were destroyed, but crucially the number of crew members who went down with them. Not far from the Selsey coast lies His Majesty’s Australian Transport Warilda. Converted to a hospital ship from a requisitioned transport vessel, she was torpedoed by a German submarine on 2 August 1918, with 123 of the 801 passengers and crew on board losing their lives. Violet Long, who had received an OBE earlier that year for her service in Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps, was one of those who drowned that night. Thanks to the hard work of researchers and funding, her story is now available for us all to hear and commemorate. It is appropriate in this Armistice debate that we call for everything possible to be done to preserve these war graves.

Equally, it is vital that we continue to honour everybody who has given service in defending us. Although this centenary year has made us all more aware of the sacrifices made by past generations, we cannot let names like Samuel White and William Turner vanish from
the record. It will be a humbling experience again to join city leaders at Chichester cathedral to pay our respects in this Sunday’s centenary commemorations and to remember the bravery of the people who gave their lives.

Over the past year, volunteers at the University of Chichester have been researching the accounts of local residents who were sent overseas during the war, and that work allows us to remember and honour their role in the conflict. As part of the Priory Park 100 Armistice celebrations in Chichester, a life-size model of a local soldier, Maurice Patten, was created by our celebrated local sculptor Vincent Gray. Maurice enrolled in Chichester and died in battle in France in 1916, aged just 24. One can hardly imagine the bravery of those young men as they huddled together in their trenches, awaiting the order to go over the top and face death in no man’s land. Vincent’s sculpture of Maurice is a fitting tribute to his memory.

The guns fell silent at 11 am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, 100 years ago. Our voices in this place should never fall silent in honouring, respecting and remembering the sacrifice and bravery of these young men and women who gave their today for our tomorrow.

6.16 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I have had the honour of chairing the Northern Ireland world war one centenary committee since 2012 and of representing Northern Ireland on the national advisory group that advises the Secretary of State and his Department.

It has been a privilege to be involved in helping to organise the main events in Northern Ireland to mark the centenary of the war, and I commend the committee I have chaired. Its members have come together from all walks of life to prepare and organise these events in the spirit of cross-community remembrance and reconciliation. Those were the two themes we chose for the centenary in Northern Ireland, because we recognise that remembrance has not always been a unifying theme in Northern Ireland.

Sadly, we saw that all too well in Enniskillen during our troubles, when men and women who had gathered to remember the dead of the first world war were cut down by an IRA bomb. The poppy became a symbol of that but, sadly, there were some who sought to make it a symbol of controversy, of division. I am proud to stand in this House of Commons today wearing a symbol that has become common in both parts of the island of Ireland: the poppy set into a three-leaved shamrock.

The three-leaved shamrock represents the three divisions that were raised in Ireland and that served in the first world war, the 10th and 16th Divisions and the 36th (Ulster) Division. It is good that Members of the Irish Parliament are now wearing this symbol, and I am proud to stand in solidarity with them, as a Unionist Member of Parliament here in the House of Commons, wearing this symbol to reflect the sacrifice of Irish men of both traditions on the island who gave their lives in common cause in that war.

As we have navigated our way through this centenary, through the centenary of the Easter rising—a historic event that is important to Irish republicanism—and the centenary of the Somme, an event that is not only marked by Unionists, we must recall that as many nationalist soldiers as Ulster volunteers died at the Somme. We have sought to reflect that, because this is our shared history. I am proud that in every county in Ireland today there is now a war memorial, representing the men from those counties who sacrificed their lives during the first world war, and that out of the lofts of many Irish homes have come the medals of those Irish men who served, as families once again lift the lid on this part of our shared history. More than 40 Irish men won the Victoria Cross in the first world war. Today, the British Government have provided to the Irish Government a memorial stone for every one of those men, and those memorial stones sit today in Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, under the shadow of a cross of sacrifice, erected in the cemetery that holds within its grounds people such as de Valera, Michael Collins and the leaders of the Easter rising. Those graves stand alongside the graves of British soldiers, a cross of sacrifice and tablets memorialising the Irish VC winners. That is a mark of the progress we have made in the past four years in making commemoration and remembrance of the first world war a shared experience on the island of Ireland, and not just something that is commemorated by one tradition on one part of the island.

I am struck by the fact that three Members of Parliament from this House of Commons from the island of Ireland fought and died in the first world war: Arthur O’Neill, a Unionist representing Mid Antrim; Tom Kettle, a nationalist from East Tyrone; and Major Willie Redmond, who died at Messines in 1917.

I have always been struck by the story of Willie Redmond. He was carried off the battlefield, mortally wounded, by an Orangeman from County Antrim, from the 36th (Ulster) Division, because at Messines the Irish Division and the (Ulster) Division fought side by side, in common cause. In the winter of 1916, Willie Redmond, writing home to his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous author, in the aftermath of the carnage of the Somme, where Irish men and Ulster men had fallen in that terrible battle, stated: “It would be a fine memorial to the men who have died so splendidly, if we could over their graves build up a bridge between the North and South.”

That is what we have sought to do in the past four years through remembrance of a war in which Irish men from all parts, in every county, in every village and town across the island of Ireland, came forward and fought under the Crown, in common cause. We have recognised this period of our shared history. That inclusive approach to commemoration is surely the greatest tribute we can pay to the Irish men, to the Ulster men, to the Unionists and nationalists, to the republicans who put on the uniform of the Crown and fought in common cause for the freedom of so many in Europe.

6.22 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A hundred years ago on Sunday, a deafening silence broke out over the vast battlefields of Europe. Then, as now, there must have been very mixed emotions. There would have been that great sense of loss and remorse that so many people had been slaughtered, and so many people maimed and incapacitated. I guess that for those in the trenches there was apprehension. Was this for real? Could they trust the enemy? Would this truce hold? Could they stumble out of those muddy dungeons that had been
[John Redwood]

their safe houses over all those long weeks and months of toil into a more open and free world where they could behave more normally? But they were, and we were, also permitted some joy that at last this murderous, bestial war was over. After four years of mass industrial slaughter, with millions of individual tragedies between the men and the families of the different combative nations, at last the slaughter was over. There was a chance to build something better.

When I lay a wreath in the morning in Burghfield and in the afternoon in Wokingham, I will be very conscious of two things. I will be conscious that there are war memorials in every other village and town in my constituency that time does not permit me to visit that day. As I look up at those lists of names on those two war memorials, I will be very conscious of how long those lists are and of how many brothers are together on the same list, with a double or treble tragedy for the family. That scale of loss is difficult to comprehend and to wrestle with.

It reminds me of my two grandfathers. As is the case with most of us, our great grandfathers or our grandfathers were the survivors. They were young men who fought as young men and then tried to build a more normal life when they got back from the trenches. They had not had time to have girlfriends and to marry and produce children before they went off to war. My two grandfathers, like many others, went at the earliest possible opportunity, or may even have misled those involved about their age so keen were they to volunteer. Both fought on the western front. One was badly injured, but, fortunately, recovered. I wanted to know from them, as a boy and as a teenager, more about these terrible events. Like many of their generation who had been through the war, they did not really want to share it with us. It was obviously so awful. They did not seek my praise and they did not seek my sympathy. They wanted to shield me from it. I wanted to know more about it, but I think that they took that view because it was so awful.

We have heard many moving remarks today, particularly about those who died, but let us think about those who survived. Let us think about what it must have been like to have four years of no normal life—as someone who was 17, 18, 19, 20 or whatever they were—where they had no privacy, and when they had very repetitious pursuits because space would not allow it, when they could not pursue their normal sports and leisure life apart from very rushed periods of leave, when they were asked to do too much and it is amazing what was going to happen next? All of those things must have been dreadful. So this is what I think we need to do. We owe it to them, to all those who directed the war, and to all those in this Parliament who sent our army to war—time does not permit this afternoon—to have a proper analysis and discussion about how we can do better in future. I am no pacifist. I think we have to arm ourselves well to protect ourselves and to preserve the peace. We have fought too many wars and, too often, we sent our Army into wars where they had limited chances of winning. We did not have a diplomatic and political strategy to follow the war. There is no use in winning a war, unless we win the peace as well. We know that the sequel to the first world war is the second world war—the tragedy that it all had to be done again on an even vaster scale with even bigger munitions and more terrifying bombs, eventually ending with the explosion of two atomic bombs to bring it to a very sad conclusion.

We need to ask ourselves how we can make sure that diplomacy and politics does not let people down so much again. How was it part of our strategy that, twice, this Parliament sent small highly professional British Armies on to the continent to fight a war against a far bigger, better armed foe when they had no chance of winning because they had too little resource, the wrong weapons and the wrong tactics? In the first world war, it took four years to recruit a mighty citizens’ army, to invent a lot of new weapons and to develop new tactics during the war. We were sadly unprepared. We asked them to do too much and it is amazing what they did.

6.28 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great honour to represent my party in this debate. I simply thank all the speakers across the House who have made some truly magnificent speeches.

Mr Speaker, may I take you north to the Cromarty Firth, beneath the waters of which lies the wreck of HMS Natal, a heavy cruiser and the pride of the Royal Navy during the first world war? On 30 December 1915, the captain decided that there would be a film show on board, to which were invited mothers and children from the shore. At 25 minutes past 3 o’clock, on that same day, there was a massive explosion that ripped through the cruiser, which sank very, very rapidly. We do not know whether it was a German torpedo. It is probably unlikely. It is more likely that it was what sealed the fate of the HMS Queen Mary, which has already been mentioned in this debate—an explosion of the magazines because the cordite was notoriously unstable. A few months later, the Admiralty published a list of 390 casualties, but no mention was made of the mothers and children who died on HMS Natal. Today, the estimate is between 390 and 421. This incident in my constituency, not far from my home town, underlines to me the absolute horror of the first world war. As time goes on, I hope that we may be able to establish some kind of memorial to the mums and children who died so cruelly and suddenly.

My grandfather’s elder brother, Arthur Stone, joined up in 1914. By 1917, he was oddly enough in a Pals battalion as a major and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for gallantry. It was a matter of great family pride when he went to collect it from Buckingham Palace with his parents. But I now turn to my grandfather’s youngest brother, Walter Stone, also known as Wally, who was a bit of a tearaway. Before the war, he had fathered a child out of wedlock in Canada—something that did not become evident until quite recently, although my father had long suspected that there had been something like that lurking in the background.
Wally also joined up in 1914, going into the Royal Fusiliers. By 1917, he was a captain. On 30 November 1917 at Bourlon Wood near Cambrai, there was a massive German attack and my great uncle was at the front. As the attack seemed to centre on his position, many soldiers were ordered to retreat, but he opted to stay at the front. He died, it is said, fighting to the last, along with the soldiers who stayed with him. It is a point of family pride that some time afterwards it was announced that he had been awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. Now, that is family pride and I boast not of it, but I do wonder about the soldiers who stayed with him. Those soldiers did not desert him. They all lost their lives; none of them survived. None of their bodies was ever found, although it is hoped that the Germans buried them. The award that my great uncle received is about all those who stayed at the front. In a way, I think that all honours and medals awarded apply to a much broader spectrum than just to the people who won them.

To return to the present in the short time available, on Sunday I shall lay a wreath in my home town of Tain in the northern highlands. There will be a parade from the Church of Scotland to the church where the war memorial is located. I dare say that it will probably be a cold day. For all I know, the wind could be in the north, coming straight from the Arctic, and may be seasoned with a dash of sleet. That is all part of the job of laying a wreath in the highlands. I have done this for many years, and each time I go into the church where the memorial is and read the names on the plaque, it is the nature of the highlands that I recognise so many of the families, who are still living in the area. And that is what I shall think about.

I think about the past, what my great uncles did and what my father told me. He was a man who always wore a poppy. He told me that, when he came down from the highlands to work in London in the 1930s, the whole city would fall silent at the stroke of 11 o’clock—that people would stop in the street for the two minutes’ silence. He told me how extraordinarily moving it was, and that memory stayed with him. I did not know my great uncles, but I knew and loved my father, who fought in the second world war in the 14th Army, and on Sunday I shall think of him. Let me just put it this way: he wore a poppy and so do I, with some pride.

6.34 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): We always say it is a great pleasure to talk in this place, but today it is actually a great honour. It is a remarkable occasion, and it is very fitting to commemorate the Armistice in this way.

I start by paying tribute to my British Legion branches in Ilkeston and Long Eaton for their relentless selling of poppies, aided by cadets. I will join them on Friday and Saturday to add to their collection, I hope. Like every other constituency, I am sure, mine is full of poppies of different sizes, made out of different materials, be they made of paper, knitted, made from the bottom of plastic bottles sprayed red, or khadi poppies. Every single type of poppy is around. I am sure that the schoolchildren, seeing the swathes of poppies everywhere, will be inspired to look into the history of the first world war, and hopefully it will help them to remember and appreciate what happened.

The commemorations have really captured the imagination in many different ways. Last Friday, I attended a performance of a very humble and moving piece called “Standing in Line”. It is a story of the great war, but specifically about Albert Scrimshaw, one of the performers’ great-uncles who bravely marched to war but never came home. He died at Passchendaele, and left a widow in Derbyshire who never remarried.

Two local people did come back, one of whom was the great-great-uncle of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Seely). He was called Major-General Jack Seely. He was the MP for Ilkeston from 1910 to 1922, and Secretary of State for War in 1912. He was the only serving Cabinet member to go to the front in 1914 and still be there in 1918. He took part in one of the last great cavalry charges in history on his beloved horse, Warrior. Many people think that the play “War Horse” is based on the character of that horse. The other great political war hero that Erewash can lay claim to is Lord Houghton of Sowerby, who was born in Long Eaton. He survived Passchendaele, unlike Albert Scrimshaw. Lord Houghton had a distinguished political career, but is quoted by Lord Graham in Hansard as describing Passchendaele in one word—“mud”. I have talked about three people whose stories we know, but across my constituency, on every war memorial, as other Members have said, there is name after name—sometimes more than one with the same surname—of those who gave their lives for our future.

Members have touched on the contribution that women made. My right hon. Friend for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) talked about the Chetwynd munitions factory. Some constituents of mine who went to work there lost their lives because of the industrial explosion. Women also worked at Stanton ironworks, making casings for shells. In the 1939 to 1945 war, they made concrete air raid shelters. Pressed concrete is still made at Stanton today for smart motorways and HS1, and hopefully HS2, so production continues. The suffragettes were great in the way that they campaigned for women to have the vote, but, to me, it would have been incomprehensible if politicians had not given women the vote after women gave so much in the great war.

I will briefly touch on something very personal, and move on to the second world war. We have talked about not being able to remember the first world war or talk to the people who lived through it. Last Sunday, I was polishing my father’s medals for him to wear next Sunday as he watches the service on TV; sadly, he is no longer well enough to go to any commemoration. He has a Burma Star. My sister and I tried to encourage him to write his story down, and he wrote some scribbled notes, but sadly, because of his stroke, he can no longer communicate, so once again a whole story is lost. It made me realise that nobody under the age of 90 will have experienced the second world war. Obviously, we have lost the last surviving participant in the first world war. We need to make sure that we can capture history at first hand before it is too late. We always say “Lest we forget” and “We will remember them”, but let us make sure that we say those phrases with great meaning, and that we remember them for many years to come.

6.39 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. We started with two wonderful
contributions from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, and have heard from many Members across the Chamber.

We all have our own family references, and I want to start by referencing two individuals. The first is my uncle, Sergeant Vernon Coaker, who is buried in Normandy, in Ranville cemetery near Caen. He served with the 3 Commando Devonshire Regiment and was killed on 6 June 1944, so this is always a particularly poignant time for me. The second is my wife's grandfather, Captain William Roper Weston of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, who won the Military Cross, and whom I had the honour of meeting on a number of occasions before his death in the mid-1980s. I have been trying to reflect on what people like them would think if they looked at our commemorations and our remembrance today.

We should be particularly proud of the number of young people who are involved in these commemorations and ceremonies. I have no evidence for this, but I think that the numbers have been increasing over the last few years, thanks to the uniformed organisations—the Scouts, the Guides and the cadets, who march with such pride and are phenomenal young people—and our schools. My colleague from Nottinghamshire, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), mentioned the schools in our area, but all of us can see this happening.

When you talk to these young people, they have an understanding—some at a very young age—of what they are remembering. All of us need to think about why that is, because it is so important that it carries on. I think it is happening because the schools and uniformed organisations teach the values; they teach that these people died because people failed to work together, to be tolerant, to respect one another and to co-operate. People sacrificed themselves to try to win that back, but it was also because of the failure of us all to respect those values that those people are in graves or became veterans. I may be wrong, but I think that young people understand that. It is really moving to go to a primary school and hear children of 10 or 11 years talking about the need for us to work together. It is with great pride that all of us, I am sure, will look at the uniformed organisations marching this weekend. The contribution they make is quite phenomenal.

Something else has changed in my area, and it is a great credit to us all. As well as the sacrifice that was made at the front, the sacrifice that was made on the home front is now respected and talked about. The role of women, the way they worked and all they did is respected and spoken about in a way that it has not been before, and we see that in the exhibitions all over the country.

I want to finish by reflecting on what this should mean for all of us now. I went to the marking of the 100th anniversary of the start of world war one at the St Symphorien cemetery, to which the Prime Minister is going on Friday. As has been mentioned, in that cemetery are the graves of the first British soldier killed, and the last British soldier killed. The horror and the poignancy of that brings home to all of us across our nation the sacrifice that was made. What was so powerful at the ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of world war one was the fact that in that very cemetery are German soldiers. On the occasion at which we marked the outbreak of the war, German military officers and German Government officials stood alongside our royalty and our politicians. Their standing together at that ceremony reminded us that the horror of what happened must be a challenge and an inspiration to us all to ensure that we do not let it happen again.

6.45 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and indeed all hon. Members on both sides of the House, in what has been an extraordinarily powerful and emotional debate.

I have not been able to think of anyone other than my great-grandmother this afternoon. She was born in 1895, and she lived with me and my parents until she died when I was nine, in 1987. She was a great woman—a forbidding matriarch—and I loved her dearly. She gave me my first job, which was to take her her tea in the morning and to put whisky in it, for which I received the princely sum of 10p a week. That was a great deal to a seven-year-old in 1985. I would sit on her bed while she sipped her tea and whisky, and she would tell me stories.

One morning, I remember asking her why her friend—I will call her Miss H—had never married, and she told me about this terrible war in which all the young men had gone away and had not come back. It made me cry; it makes me cry now. I found out subsequently that my great-grandmother's husband, a guy called Harry who was a cider farmer in Somerset, had not gone to war because he had a heart murmur. It was a very curious moment in history when biological weakness actually caused someone's DNA to be passed on. Miss H did not have any such luck. I also found out subsequently that she had worked in a butcher's shop, and when the butcher died, he—much to the shock of the town—left the business to her, not to his wife. We do not know whether it was love, but if it was, it perhaps speaks of a time when there were not very many men around.

I think of the norm now. In the first census after the great war, in 1921, it was revealed that there were 1.7 million more women than men in Britain. The press and politicians rather coldly and cruelly dubbed them the “surplus women”. I also think of a speech given in a school in Bournemouth, quite close to where I grew up, in 1918, when the headmistress is said to have told the girls, “I have come to tell you a terrible truth: nine out of 10 of you will not marry. This is a mathematical fact. The local men whom you would have married have been killed, and you must make your way in the world as best you can.” Indeed, they did: they went out and made the best of it, and went on to ensure that their gender was no longer quite so defined by its relationship to men.

All those men who died were sons; many were brothers, and many were husbands. A great many of them were not married, and the women they did not marry did not marry either. This generation of maiden aunts were widowed before they wed. I dare say a great many of them had enormous satisfaction from the jobs and the lives that they built, but as D. H. Lawrence wrote, if mutual love is “Like a magnet’s keeper
CLOSING THE ROUND”

then for a great many, the years to come were incomplete. I say their sacrifice deserves no less remembrance.
Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to all those speakers who have made such moving contributions today.

Let me start by making a special mention of the contribution made by the officers and men of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The regiment raised a total of 16 battalions and was awarded 68 battle honours in the first world war, including six Victoria Crosses. They came at a terrible price, though, with almost 7,000 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders losing their lives between 1914 and 1918. Although the regiment recruited throughout west-central Scotland, I wish to single out the 8th Battalion, the Argyllshire, which was stationed in Dunoon and raised no fewer than eight companies from the towns and villages throughout Argyll. Of course, many others from Argyll and Bute joined other regiments or, indeed, other branches of the service. Their contributions are equally valued. As the Member who represents the submarine base at Faslane, I am pleased that the sacrifice made by those in the submarine service has already recognised in the debate.

I have no doubt whatsoever that come Sunday at 11 o’clock, there will not be a town or village in Argyll and Bute that will not stop and remember all those we have lost. As we have heard, every family has their own story to tell, and I wish to share with the House that of my grandfather, John O’Hara, who as a 17-year-old from the Calton district of Glasgow joined the Royal Army Service Corps in the autumn of 1916 and was sent to London to be trained as a transport driver. Having completed his basic training, however, he was spotted, singled out and seconded to the Machine Gun Corps, and then sent to Clipstone camp, near Mansfield, for basic training as a machine gunner.

In the summer of 1917, John O’Hara was sent to France, where he joined No. 13 Machine Gun Company, which was preparing for what would be known as the second battle of Passchendaele, in which he was injured when a bullet entered his shoulder and went through his hand. He was admitted to the military hospital in Flanders before being repatriated back to the UK. Every soldier who was sent back injured was accompanied by what was known as a soldier’s character reference. The report on machine gunner Private John O’Hara described him as being “sober, reliable and intelligent”. I like to think that that was the start of a long family tradition. Back in the UK, he was treated for his injuries at Old Park military hospital before being sent back to France in early 1918 to join the Machine Gun Corps of the 52nd Lowland Division.

For reasons which I have never managed to fathom, when he was back in France, John O’Hara was stationed at the town of Armentières and was part of a group tasked with salvaging sacred relics from the bomb-damaged church of St Vaast in the town. While they were working there, the celebrated Daily Mirror photographer David McLellan happened by with his camera and took a series of photographs of my grandfather and his comrades at work both inside and outside the church.

The photograph of those otherwise anonymous Tommies, one of them my grandfather, standing to attention on the steps of the church, carrying the rescued wooden statues, has become very well known and, I think, rather poignant. It is one of the great images of the final days of the great war. I refer Members who have not seen the photograph or who do not know the story to the excellent article by Tom Parry in the Daily Mirror just last month, for which he recreated the photograph, with the villagers of Armentières on the steps of the church of St Vaast—on the exact spot—carrying the original statues rescued by my grandfather and his comrades exactly 100 years ago.

Thankfully, and rather obviously, my grandfather survived the last terrible months of the war, but I have always wondered what happened to his four comrades. What fate befell them in those last awful months?

My grandfather was discharged in October 1919, and in the years immediately following, he enrolled at Glasgow University, where he gained a medical degree. He worked as a general practitioner in the east end of Glasgow for many years and was for a while the official doctor to Celtic football club, which brings great pride to the family.

Ours is just one of the millions of stories that families across the UK have. We are in the fortunate position that ours also comes with a remarkable photographic record. So when I lay a wreath at the war memorial in Helensburgh on Sunday to remember all those who gave their lives, I will say thanks for my grandfather’s safe return, but I will spare a thought for his four comrades and hope that they, too, made it back home safely to their loved ones.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a great honour to speak and to listen to so many moving speeches today, including the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), and to be able to pay tribute to so many Thirsk and Malton constituents of yesteryear, including in my home town of Easingwold, where it is my great privilege to lay a wreath on Sunday and pay tribute to all those who gave so much in the great war and to the sacrifices of their loved ones, their friends, their families.

Even 100 years later, every family is touched in some way by world war one. For the story I am about to tell, I should like to thank my relatives, Richard and Penny Booth, born Hollinrake, of Wells, Somerset. Some time ago, they wrote to me to tell of the incredible feats of Penny’s father, my grandfather’s brother, Ernest Hollinrake. It is a striking example of the millions of individual contributions on both sides of the conflict.

Ernest enlisted on 7 September 1914 alongside his pals in the Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), an infantry regiment. Defence of the realm against a foreign aggressor, of course, was every person’s duty. His Pals battalion was known as the Lydgaters. Lydgate is a small village just outside Todmorden, West Yorkshire, where my family originate. Ernest was only 18 years old. His occupation: cotton operator in the local spinning mill.

There are few accounts of Ernest’s infantry service other than the official records, the first of which is three years into his service. During the third battle of Ypres, where 77,479 men were lost in the month of September alone, for his action on 20 September 1917, Second Lieutenant Ernest Hollinrake was awarded the Military Cross. The citation reads:
“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He...led (his platoon) forward under covering fire from Lewis guns and rifle grenades, and assaulted a strong point which he captured with thirty prisoners. His courage and determination were a splendid example to his platoon.”

Then, on 27 May 1918, near Rossignol Wood, in the northern part of the Somme, Ernest Hollinrake was awarded a bar to the Military Cross. The citation reads:

“When two of his front line posts were attacked by a strong hostile raiding party, and one section, greatly outnumbered, was overrun, he dashed up, leapt on the parapet, shot the enemy leader with his revolver, and led his men in a charge on the remainder, putting them to flight. By his great courage and promptness he undoubtedly saved his section, and prevented the remainder, putting them to flight. By his great courage and promptness he undoubtedly saved his section, and prevented the enemy securing a much needed identity, and gained what proved a valuable one himself.”

In 1919, in an undated newspaper cutting with the heading, “Todmorden Military Honour”, the following was published:

“It is officially announced that the president of the French Republic has been pleased to confer the Croix de Guerre, with Palm on Lieut. Hollinrake of Todmorden... He received his British decoration personally from the hand of His Majesty at Buckingham Palace a short time ago.”

He survived. Most of his pals did not. Ernest stayed in the Army until 1922 and later went into business in Leeds. He was lucky by comparison to many.

I am not sure what advice Ernest or any of my fallen constituents would give us today if they were here to listen to this debate or to speak in it. Whatever the unforgivable mistakes and unthinkable atrocities of war, I am sure, at the end of the day, they would be able propose no other alternative than the last resort of being prepared to send our troops into the tragedies of war. Today, all we can do is salute them and all those who made so many sacrifices. Today and every day, we say, “Lest we forget.”

7 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15).

That, at this day’s sitting, the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the centenary of the Armistice may be proceeded with, though opposed, until 8.00pm.—[Iain Stewart.]

Question agreed to.
Debate resumed.
Main Question again proposed.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in today’s debate and to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I associate myself with the remarks of a number of hon. Members. I was particularly impressed by the speeches from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr. Simpson), as well as those from other colleagues.

Like many Members, I lost relatives in both world wars and I have found today’s debate deeply moving. I want to briefly mention one particular relative, my wife’s great uncle Albert Woodhead, who died at the Somme aged 19. He has no known grave. Our family visited the Thiepval memorial a few years ago. It was incredibly moving.

My constituency of Reading East, like the whole of the UK, Ireland and the Commonwealth, was deeply affected. I pay tribute to all the men and women who served in our armed forces as well as in other roles such as in the merchant navy and the munitions factories, and on the wider home front. Britain owes a huge debt of honour to the Commonwealth and to what was then the British empire. It is important to remember the bravery and sacrifice not only of British forces, but of all those who served from Ireland, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Africa and the West Indies, as well as Australia, Canada, South Africa and other dominions such as New Zealand. Indeed, 1.5 million men served in the Indian army alone. Commonwealth and British empire forces were engaged on a wide range of fronts across the globe.

I would like to turn to the effect of the great war on Reading and Woodley and to mention some outstanding local people. Thousands of people from Berkshire served in many capacities. In particular, I would like to mention the story of Trooper Potts, who is the only person from Reading to have won a Victoria Cross. Frederick Potts, who came from the Katesgrove area of Reading, which I used to represent as a councillor, was awarded a Victoria Cross for his outstanding bravery. He saved the life of an injured comrade by dragging him to safety from no-man’s land during extremely heavy fighting in the Gallipoli campaign. Although injured in the thigh himself, Trooper Potts dragged his severely wounded comrade 600 yards on a trenching shovel. Fred Potts ultimately survived the great war, dying at the age of 50 in 1943. Arthur Andrews, whom he saved, lived until he was 89. This moving story reminds us again of the service and self-sacrifice of the first world war generation. It is just one of many incidents we remember today.

In my own life many years later, my son used to play football with one of Trooper Potts’ descendants, and I got to know the family well, which was a huge privilege. In this strange way, our history is all around us. For me, it has been a personal privilege to take part in this debate and to commemorate a small part of that history with colleagues from across the whole House.

Before I finish, I would like to thank the many organisations involved in commemorating this important anniversary. In particular, I would like to mention Berkshire branches of the Royal British Legion and Wokingham and Reading Borough Councils. Woodley Town Council has put up an extremely moving display featuring some of the servicemen from what was then the village of Woodley. Woodley is now a large suburb of Reading, with thousands and thousands of residents. Sadly, many of the small number of soldiers from that once village never returned. I also thank the many clubs, charities, employers and other organisations who have helped to mark this important commemoration and the local historians who have taken part.

7.4 pm
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. At the outset, I want to observe how well the debate was started by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and, in particular, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). The tone they set was dignified, moving and absolutely appropriate for this occasion.
On Sunday, we will mark the Armistice and 100 years since the guns fell silent, although it is worth noting, as has been said, that the war did not formally end until the signing of the treaty of Versailles, so we still have all the stories of attacks being launched right up to the final moment that the guns stopped. Generals feared that the war could restart if a treaty could not be negotiated, so they wanted to have the best position possible. That is why we have the tragedies of people being killed a couple of minutes beforehand. When I was out in Belgium earlier this year on Great Pilgrimage 90, I saw that one of the casualties was at 10.58 that morning.

What really brought home to me the enormity of the sacrifice was attending, at the start of the centenary commemorations, one of the “Lights Out” events, held at the local St Marychurch war memorial in Torquay. At the time of the war, St Marychurch was a small, still relatively rural community on the edge of the town. Ninety-four names are on the war memorial. I was 35 then, which made me older than absolutely everyone on it, which I found particularly poignant. These men had been in the queue at the recruiting office, smiling. There are probably still some photos of them leaving some of the local stations, having signed up expecting the war to be over by Christmas, before finding themselves, two years later, on the Somme.

This is about remembering that it was a war on an industrial scale for the first time in human history, with gas, planes, tanks, trench warfare and mass artillery barrages, and lines that stayed still for years. These were all things that had never been seen before. It was also a crossover between two generations of warfare. New technology was coming in, but it was still the age of the horse. In the first part of 1914, the British cavalry was still advancing across France and attack cavalry charges were still being mounted. On Saturday I was in Cockington, where there is a plaque as part of the purple poppy campaign, which reminds us of many of the animals that went away to war with their owners. It was a unique partnership, as they faced the horrors of the battlefield together.

I mentioned that I went out as part of Great Pilgrimage 90 to revisit many of the sites from 90 years before. Old comrades and families went to see where their loved ones were killed. The battlefield from the battle of Loos was particularly remarkable. It was totally flat, easy to look across, and overlooked by a couple of slag heaps that provided superb observation points—the army could be seen forming from miles away. That is where, in about a five-mile stretch, about 20,000 of our soldiers were killed. It was particularly moving when we asked about the attack—it was in September 1915, and it failed. When did the line finally move? In about August or September 1918. For three years, the bodies lay in the field. In a distance not that different from the length of this Chamber, for three years British and German forces looked at each over this field, where so many of their comrades had fallen. This meant that, unsurprisingly, by the time that most of the bodies were recovered, they could no longer be identified.

It is moving to see where the first and last shots were fired and to note how close they are, and then to visit the cemetery where, as has been mentioned, the first and last casualties are buried. Interestingly, the cemetery was first constructed by the Germans in the war, and our troops were treated there in a respectful way. One mistake was made. They called a regiment “royal” when it was not royal. They assumed it was a royal regiment because it was from Middlesex. The plaque is still there. It is a sign that in the middle of that horror respect was still being paid.

Thankfully, Europe today is very different from the Europe of despots and dictators who just over a century ago drove us to war, and today some of our former foes are now friends. It is absolutely right that the German President has been invited to the Cenotaph on Sunday. My grandfather was badly injured in world war two. His mother got the thing that was second only to the telegram saying your loved one had been killed: a rail warrant to go to meet him coming off a hospital ship. He was always very clear that he fought the Germans to get rid of the Nazis. His fight was not with the ordinary German, but with the leadership of Germany, and the only way of removing them was to go to war and remove the evil of national socialism from Europe.

It is right that on Sunday we remember the sacrifice of a century ago and that we never forget, because the first step towards it happening again is forgetting the lessons of how it happened in the first place.

7.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), whom I thank for his contribution, and to speak in this debate. Indeed, it is pleasure to follow all the incredible contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, particularly those of the Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State.

I am proud to have served in the armed forces, in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army, in the Royal Artillery. I am proud to have worn that uniform and served my Queen and country. Northern Ireland has a very strong and proud service history. Newtownards, the main town in my borough, was home to the legendary Blair Mayne, who received the highest awards for bravery during the second world war and for whom we still await the posthumous recognition that so rightly belongs to him—his earned but withheld Victoria Cross.

I will take a similar theme to my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). A total of 206,000 Irishmen served in the British forces during the first world war, and another 130,000 were volunteers recruited from Ireland for the duration of the war; of these, some 24,000 originated from the Redmondite national volunteers, and 26,000 joined from the Ulster volunteers; and 80,000 of those recruits had no experience in either of the paramilitary formations before going to war. The recruitment rate in Ulster matched that in Britain itself, and that in Leinster and Munster was about two thirds of that in Britain, while Connacht lagged behind them. Northern Catholics enlisted just as often as Protestants. The German bullet did not distinguish between Catholic and Protestant, between nationalist and Unionist—anyone who fought the German empire was fair game.

Members might wonder why I have taken so long to outline the wholeness of Ireland at that time. The answer is this: I am tired of this remembrance event being politicised and turned so that wearing a poppy becomes a declaration of allegiance. Wearing a poppy is
merely being respectful and thankful to those who laid down their lives to allow us the freedom we so unthinkingly enjoy today.

I was not surprised to learn that more than 50 contracted and former Celtic football players fought in world war one. William Angus was awarded the Victoria Cross. I once read an article that stated:

“The remarks attributed to National Volunteer and poet, Francis Ledwidge, who was to die in preparation of the Third battle of Ypres in 1917, perhaps best exemplifies the changing...nationalist sentiment towards enlisting, the War, and to the Germans and British.”

Those remarks were:

“I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilization, and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions”.

They fought while maintaining their nationalism, but now it seems that some refuse to remember for fear of somehow losing their nationalism. It is a very sad state of affairs. I am not swayed by the affiliation of any person who fought against the Germans. I am equally grateful to them all and honour them today.

In this the centenary of the first world war. I long for an end to the discussions of white poppies, for an end to the discussions of sectarianism. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley, I long to stand as we did then.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise the great movement in recent years in terms of being able to recognise those who fought in the first world war from both Northern Ireland and the Republic? For example, the graves at Glasnevin cemetery are now marked by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the remembrance wall, which for years was at the back of the cemetery, now takes pride of place at the entrance to the cemetery.

Jim Shannon: I have given an analogy from the past, and when the hon. Gentleman intervened I was about to give an analogy for the future. I too have been privileged to visit Glasnevin cemetery, as have many other Members. I was greatly impressed when we had the opportunity to visit the graves and see what the Republic of Ireland had done to remember those who had given their lives. Some of the history that we heard about was incredible.

Bob Stewart: May I pursue that point? I understand from what I heard last night that, as support for the poppy has grown in the Republic of Ireland, there has been a surge in the number of people from the Republic who want to join the British Army again. Is that not wonderful?

Jim Shannon: It almost makes me cheer. I am very pleased to hear about it, but it comes as no surprise to me, because there has always been a tradition of service in the Republic of Ireland. As I said earlier, the fact that 130,000 people from the Republic volunteered to fight in the first world war was an indication of their wish to do so. The Irish Guards have a strong association with us, and in my town a large proportion of recruits are from the Republic. They are quite happy to swear allegiance to Her Majesty and to the British Army, and to do what they are instructed to do in their job.

I am also pleased—this is relevant to what has just been said by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—that we are beginning to see a tradition of change. War memorials down south that were going to rack and ruin have been spruced up, and memorial services are now being held as we hold them in Northern Ireland, over a period of time. Great changes are coming, and indeed change has come, but some people may still be unwilling to accept the new future.

I want us to stand shoulder to shoulder, regardless of religious belief, political ideals or anything else. I long for us to stand in simple gratitude and respect for those whose blood has marked the way and allowed us our right to debate these issues in the House tonight, along with the right to abstain—if that is what people want to do—and the right to voice opposing opinions, as we often do in the House, although we are still friends at the end of it. All those rights we have for one reason only: the sacrifice that was made with us in mind.

Some Members have referred to the role for youth. In my constituency, there is an incredible turnout on Remembrance Sunday for all the parades that I go to. How proud I am—indeed, how proud we would all be—of the uniformed church groups and the Army, Air Force and naval cadets: young people who are just starting out in life, but who want to serve in uniform. We also have an opportunity to see some of our older soldiers, although every year we look around and see one or two fewer. It is the same for all of us. That is life, but a new generation is coming in, and that new generation will follow all of us, and all those who have left us. It is good to have a remembrance service of that kind in my constituency, and I suspect that the same applies to every constituency that enrolls uniformed organisations and young people to make their contribution. They understand very well what is going on.

I wear my poppy, and so do my sons, who, in turn, have taught my granddaughters what it means to remember—not to idealise, not to seek to alter historical fact, and not to make any proclamation other than that, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them. That is what today's debate is about. I long, in this special year, for those who have determined to disrespect the meaning of the poppy, and who simply do not care enough to buy a poppy or perhaps even to attend a remembrance service, instead to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who attend annually, and to express themselves in that way.

Let us all stand and take a minute simply to say, “We remember, we are grateful, and we will seek to ensure that the lessons learned through your tremendous sacrifice will be passed on to future generations” — which I know that they will. That is not just a phrase, but my enduring promise: I will remember them.
to the Shropshire Yeomanry—he was from Small Heath in Birmingham—ended up in the Cheshire Regiment and was killed in action on the western front on 28 February 1918.

Like many others in this House, I have the good fortune to be old enough to have actually known men who served on the western front. These old men of my boyhood had already outlived their biblical apportionment of three score years and 10, and when they said anything about the war it was only to speak of their pals and the horror of it all, with no detail.

As has already been said by an Opposition Member, my constituency of Stirling has a long association with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a regiment that gave extraordinary service to this country. Stirling is a remarkable place for another reason: 43 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps was founded, established and headquartered in Stirling. In fact the Scottish headquarters of the Royal Flying Corps was at the Station Hotel in Stirling. To this day Stirling retains its proud links to the Royal Air Force and honours the successors of those original men in their flying machines.

Of interest in Stirling over the past few years has been the way in which the Stirling Observer has reported the 100th anniversary of the war. Each week it has reproduced reports from the time, bringing to life the way Stirling was during the great war. It has been sobering. The Stirling Observer reports that tourists travelled from all over Scotland to see the new flying machines of the Royal Flying Corps based in Stirling, but it also printed week after week lists of casualties, with pictures of young men in uniform. The newspaper talked about shortages and inconveniences at home, too. This has been a remarkable act of remembrance by the Stirling Observer, and I would like to put on record my thanks to John Rowbotham, its editor, and his team, because they have provided for Stirling a remarkable and telling memorial.

Stirling’s contribution to the war effort was not insubstantial and the number of people listed on each of the war memorials in all the villages of Stirlingshire give some sense of the sacrifice made by families, but there are two individuals I would like to mention today. The first is Lieutenant James Huffam. I recently had the honour of attending a ceremony in Dunblane to honour the 100th anniversary of the actions that led to him receiving the Victoria Cross for bravery. He rushed an enemy machine gun in France, crippling its attack, and under heavy fire he withdrew carrying a wounded comrade. Later on the same day, he led another attack, capturing eight prisoners and allowing the British advance.

I would also like to talk about 772 Private William Ebenezer Monteith, whose daughter, Margaret Davidson, I had the privilege of accompanying to the service of commemoration that we held earlier today in St Margaret’s church. Private Monteith joined the Seaforth Highlanders in 1910 and was a member of the British Expeditionary Force, so he was among the first to be deployed in 1914. They were called a “contemptible little army” by the Kaiser and so proudly called themselves the “old contemptibles.”

Private Monteith was soon captured at the retreat from Mons on 26 August 1914. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war. It was his duty to try to escape, and he escaped from at least two prisoner of war camps, at Westerholt and subsequently at Friedrichsfeld. He was recaptured each time. During his separation from his family, they received a letter, which is reported in the Stirling Observer. He said in the letter that the “food is inadequate” and he concluded it with his favourite battle-cry: “Roll on, Bonnie Scotland”—a battle-cry we can echo to this day.

That story and the many others of this generation tell of service—they put themselves last, putting service to their family, their community and their country first. Those who answered the call and those who were separated from their loved ones all served equally and we will remember them.

Lieutenant Huffam and Private Monteith both came back from the war and went on to live their lives—to marry, to have families of their own and to have careers. They gave us the country that we have today, and in honouring the sacrifice of those with whom they served who did not return, we also honour them. It is our duty and our privilege to honour their memories by seeking to prevent such sacrifices from being necessary at any time in the future, and also to build a country and a world of which they could feel proud. Every day in this place we are reminded of the great titans of Parliament whose statues are all around the building, and I am grateful that on Sunday we will all stand before memorials etched with the names of those who have given us the country that we have today. Such is our heritage, and such is the price of our liberty.

The Essex Regiment Museum is based in Chelmsford and it is well worth a visit. We are proud of a number of the exhibits, not least the Napoleonic eagle captured from the French at the battle of Salamanca in 1812. There are also some grim memories there, however. There is a picture of the last stand at Gundamuck, when almost the entire 44th Regiment lost their lives in the first Anglo-Afghan war. We also have memorials to world war one, in which 9,000 members of the regiment died in Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine, and at Arras, Cambrai, Ypres and the Somme. I visited Ypres four years ago and joined students from a British school based deep in the East Anglian fens and students from a twinned school in Germany. They visited the battlefields together and unveiled a memorial that they had jointly designed, at the site of the Christmas day football match in 1914. It was deeply moving to be there with the next generation as they came together to remember the previous ones. We must never forget.

My own childhood was spent, half a century ago, in Northern Ireland during the troubles, and I would like to put on record my personal thanks to those who stood up against terrorism in the United Kingdom. I first sold poppies 40 years ago on the streets of Omagh, County Tyrone. We had armed servicemen on our streets in those days. The weekend before last, I joined poppy sellers in Chelmsford and it was a very happy occasion. The town is covered with poppies, many of which are
like the knitted one that I am wearing today. I am also wearing the shamrock poppy, to remember those Irish soldiers who lost their lives and who have never been commemorated.

I also want to remember another group. Chelmsford has a long history of Quakerism. Quakers are members of a peace church who take a moral stand against participation in armed conflict. At the beginning of the first world war, a group of young Quakers created the Friends' Ambulance Unit. Its 1,200 members were all civilians, but they worked closely with fighting soldiers. The unit provided those conscientious objectors with a way to support the wounded, and an alternative to military service. They worked on the frontlines providing medical support for troops and civilians, and on hospital ships in the channel and the Mediterranean. They cared for everyone they found wounded, including Germans. By November 1918, 21 members of the Friends' Ambulance Unit had given their own lives. In 1947, the Quakers were awarded the Nobel peace prize. Even today, Quakers act as ecumenical accompaniers, working in Israel and Palestine to provide a protective presence and to monitor and report human rights abuses. They wear brightly coloured jackets to accompany children to school across the battle zones. Jesus said:

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”

but he also said:

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

and we must remember them, too. We must remember them all.

7.29 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As many have said, it is a privilege to speak in this debate. I feel completely unworthy to speak, in a sense, following the many extraordinary speeches that we have heard this afternoon and this evening from right hon. and hon. Members. By my count, we have had 26 speeches from Back Benchers, and two excellent speeches from the Front-Bench spokesmen. The debate was opened by the Secretary of State for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who was extremely ably answered by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, who spoke brilliantly.

There have been so many brilliant speeches that it would be invidious to single one out. What struck me, however, is that we have heard speeches from all four nations of the United Kingdom, and on a variety of aspects of the Armistice and the great war, ranging from the role of women and Ireland—being of Irish heritage, I found that deeply interesting and significant—to the role of the Quakers; I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mention them at the end. It has been an extraordinary, illuminating and, at times, emotional debate. Hon. Members did well to hold it together at times, because there has certainly been a catch in the throat and a tear in the eye across the House from time to time.

We are grateful for the opportunity to commemorate the Armistice that marked the end of the great war, and for the chance to speak of our armed forces communities, and the sacrifices that were made and continue to be made for our safety. As we have heard, the Armistice put an end to over four years of tragic conflict between Germany and the allied forces, and mechanised killing on land, at sea and in the air. It was signed at 5 am on 11 November 1918 in a French railway carriage in Compiègne, and the guns stopped firing six hours later. As we heard earlier today in the service in St Margaret’s, the Prime Minister of the day, the Welshman David Lloyd George, when announcing the terms of the Armistice, expressed relief at the ending of what he called “the cruellest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind.”

It is interesting to note how different people approach history, because I visited that railway carriage in Compiègne many years ago, and of course the same carriage was used by Hitler in 1940 to force the French into signing the surrender that resulted in Vichy France and Germany occupying most of France. However, when I visited it 25 years ago, there was no mention of that anywhere in the entire French presentation—there was reference only to the 1918 signing of the Armistice. We should acknowledge all aspects of history. This afternoon and evening, hon. Members have given an honest appraisal of the great war, the Armistice, its significance and all aspects of it, good and bad.

Bob Stewart: We have not talked about the French much today, but the French suffered incredible casualties. My wife’s family lost 17 members at Verdun. We have a biscuit tin full of Croix de Guerre, Légions d’Honneur and Médailles Militaire, but we do not even know to whom they were given. The French really suffered, as did the Germans.

Kevin Brennan: I am glad that the hon. and gallant Gentleman has had the opportunity to put that on the record.

It is difficult to envisage the scale of the scourge that Lloyd George talked about. Four million men served in the British Army, alongside 3 million soldiers and labourers from what was then the British empire and Commonwealth. Some 1.27 million served from India alone, as well as over 10,000 from Jamaica. There were over 10 million military and 7 million civilian fatalities worldwide. Around 1 million British military personnel were killed, and the fighting stretched from Flanders to Gallipoli, from Pilkem Ridge to Palestine.

On this centenary of Armistice Day, we ponder three central thoughts. First, we honour the memories of those who fought and died. Secondly, we are solemnly grateful that the terrible tragedy came to an end. Thirdly, we are committed to preventing such devastation from happening again. I have been present in this Chamber when the House has been in a different mood—when the drums of war have been sounding. We should remember this moment when, inevitably, such events present themselves to us again. We should remember this kind of debate, as well as the mood the House sometimes gets into when we hear the sound of the drums of war.

These moments of commemoration are important, and I thank all those involved: the Imperial War Museum, the BBC, the Royal British Legion, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—we have heard so much about the commission this afternoon—and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The fund held an important reception last week, and the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Prime Minister’s envoy, was present.
It really was a testament to the hard work done by him and by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on the commemorations.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think my hon. Friend has missed them by mistake, but he also needs to thank the parliamentary authorities, which have done an excellent job. The Library and the archivists have shown the history not only of Members of both Houses who fought and died in the war, but of the Clerks and other staff who served.

Kevin Brennan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I acknowledge the work he has done with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, including with me in Wales; we did some work a few years ago on restoring some of the graves in my Cardiff West constituency.

Members will know that the legacy of the first world war resonates in all our communities. Most cities, towns and villages in the UK have a war memorial, and we will all be visiting those war memorials this weekend to lay wreaths and pay tribute to those who left our communities more than 100 years ago and did not return. I will attend the Welsh national wreath-laying ceremony in Cardiff, and a special service of commemoration at Llandaff cathedral in my constituency. Baroness Finlay of Llandaff and I will both lay wreaths at the war memorial in Llandaff city on Friday.

Every community has its own first world war story, and as many others have done, I will briefly pay tribute to those from my Cardiff West constituency whose courage has become part of our collective memory. On 7 July 1916, the 16th Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, known as the Cardiff City Battalion, fought at Mametz wood alongside other Welsh units as part of the 38th Division, which was devised by Prime Minister David Lloyd George and included the Welsh Regiment, the South Wales Borderers and the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

The Cardiff City Battalion was exposed to heavy machine-gun fire, and more than 150 men died, with many more injured. Welsh rugby internationals Dick Thomas and John Williams were among the dead. A survivor, William Joshua, recalled:

"On the Somme, the Cardiff City Battalion died.”

It might be of interest to you, Mr Speaker, that Fred Keenor, who subsequently captained Cardiff City football club when they defeated Arsenal in the 1927 FA cup final, was injured at the battle of the Somme, and it very nearly ended his football career.

Anna Soubry: We have the games of remembrance in Nottingham on Thursday. The German and British women’s army teams will play at lunch time at Notts County, and in the evening the British and German men’s army teams will play at Nottingham Forest. Although I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would love to attend, he probably will not be able to, but is it not a great event?

Kevin Brennan: It is a great event. I will not be able to attend, but I can do even better than attend: my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, will be there on behalf of the Labour party.

Vernon Coaker: And me.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend will also be there, so I can supply the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) with some first-rate people in support.

I had better press on, Mr Speaker, before you call us all back to order. The following year saw the battle of Passchendaele, which carries particular weight in Welsh cultural memory, as my hon. Friends the Members for Llanelli and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is sitting at the back, will know. We commemorated the battle’s centenary last year with a debate in this Chamber.

Every village in Wales was affected by the battle, and 20,000 first language Welsh-speaking soldiers alone were killed at Passchendaele.

1917 was the year of Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu, the Eisteddfod of the black chair. Some hon. Members will know that the Eisteddfod is the annual Welsh-language cultural festival, with poetry, dancing and singing. That year, Ellis Humphrey Evans, under the now-famous pseudonym, Hedd Wyn, was judged as the winner of the chair at the Eisteddfod, the highest honour available in Welsh culture, which is awarded to the best poet writing in traditional strict meter. However, when the winner’s pseudonym was called in the traditional ceremony at the Eisteddfod, no one stood up in the audience to reveal themselves as the triumphant poet. It was then announced that the winning bard had been killed in battle six weeks prior. Hedd Wyn had been one of 4,000 men killed on a single morning when the Royal Welch Fusiliers went over the top in the battle of Pilkem Ridge. The poet from Trawsfynydd has become the subject of poems and history lessons in classrooms across Wales, and even of an Oscar-nominated feature film.

That poignant story of Hedd Wyn captured the mourning of a nation. Stories such as these help us to remember the humanity of each individual who lost their life, and we have heard many such stories this evening. Each one was a son, a daughter, a loved one who was missed by someone at home. As we have seen today, they are still missed by their descendants in this House and across the country.

In my constituency, in 1917, the Women’s Land Army was formed; 20,000 women across the UK enlisted to work in places such as Green Farm in the Ely area of my constituency, which is now a council housing estate. As a farm, it was run predominantly by female farmhands during the war. One of the workers, Agnes Gatorex, left domestic service to work on the farm. She said:

“Every morning, we would get up at five o’clock and milk a hundred cows. We would then take the milk to Glan Ely Hospital.”

That is where the soldiers were kept. I am proud, as I am sure we all are, of the efforts of Agnes and so many women across the country; we have heard about those in today’s debate. In rightly commemorating the enfranchisement of some women in 1918, let us not forget that working-class women such as Agnes, or my grandmother, Gwenllian Evans, did not get the vote until nearly a decade later.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is talking about the effort of women during the great war. It is worth recognising that the Women’s Institute was founded during this period; as Mr Speaker knows, we held the centenary event in my constituency. These women were the stars of the home front as well, and they are worth mentioning.
Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the founding of the Women’s Institute. May I also pay tribute to him for rightly drawing attention, as a former merchant seaman, to the sacrifice of the merchant navy? It is of course because of these sacrifices that the centenary of Armistice Day, and Remembrance Sunday each year, are an essential part of our cultural life. We must remember those who fought to keep us safe. We must recommit to ensuring that we never allow such division and devastation to happen again.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will close, as others have done, with poetry. I turn to the words of Hedd Wyn’s poem “Rhyfel”, which means war in Welsh. I will read part of it in Welsh first and then give the English translation. It reads:

“Mae’r hen delynau genid gynt,
Yng nghrog ar gangau’r helyg draw,
A gwedd y bechgyn lond y gywnt,
A’u gwedd yn gymysg efo’r glaw.”

It translates as follows:

“The harps to which we sang, are hung
On willow boughs, and their refrain
Drowned by the anguish of the young
Whose blood is mingled with the rain.”

Mr Speaker, we will remember them.

7.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Speaker. This has been a privilege and an education, a reminder that no community was truly unaffected by the visible and invisible scars of a century of our country’s history. A reminder that no community was truly unaffected by the visible and invisible scars of a century of our country’s history. A reminder that no community was truly unaffected by the visible and invisible scars of a century of our country’s history.

Both Front Benchers spoke about sacrifice, and we have heard not only about emancipation, courage, gallantry, equality, bravery, impact, loss, opportunity, reflection, contribution, community, family, survivors, duty and tragedy, but about home and coming back safely.

This weekend, we will mark the Armistice with silence and we will pay our respects. This is an opportunity for all the communities represented in this House to come together. The Secretary of State spoke about blood, mud and misery, about a collective effort of commemoration and about using history to bring us together. He said that we should give thanks for the end of the great war and be ready for the special sound of church bells as they ring out across the land 100 years on. It is bittersweet, said the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), and what a magnificent speech that was. He talked about learning from living memories, not just from history, about the poppy from Flanders fields, about civilian support for our Royal British Legion, and, yes, about common cause and, again, about bell ringing for those millions who never came home.

It really has been the most poignant and often painful afternoon of debate. It has been touching, thoughtful, passionate, emotional and, above all, personal. I shall try to pay tribute to some of these heartfelt contributions this afternoon. There were Members of Parliament from across this land in the Chamber—from Aldridge-Brownhills, Eastleigh, Henley, Ynys Môn, West Dunbartonshire to Cheltenham.

Moving tributes will be made this weekend as we all give thanks. I, too, will lay wreaths in my constituency—nine will be laid across the day. In the afternoon, in Netley, I will be at the site of the Royal Victoria Hospital, where only a refurbished chapel stands. It is also the site of the Netley military cemetery, in which 636 Commonwealth service personnel from world war one and 35 service personnel from the second world war lay. The site is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. There are also the graves of 69 Germans, 12 Belgians and one Pole, all of which continue, rightly, to be cared for.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. It is always an honour to speak in this place, but, sometimes, it is also worth remembering that it is just as great an honour to sit and listen quietly, which is what I have done. I want her to do this, if she will. Many hon. Members have mentioned Victoria Cross winners—there were 627 in total in the first world war. Will the Government commit to ensure that every one of them, as a way to remember all those who served, are particularly marked in their locales—in the villages, towns and cities—perhaps by a plaque, by a road name, by a building or even by planting a tree? There will be war memorials, but I think that we can do more in this centenary year.

Mims Davies: My right hon. Friend is tenacity itself. It is right that such important people are raised in this debate, and I thank him for making such an important point.

Where do I begin with some of the contributions this afternoon? My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) spoke about Brockenhurst. He said that we must not stint on defence and resources in peacetime. As we heard from the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), we need to commit to peace, to remember the people who were in peril on the sea and to remember the pain that they felt. Also among us was a historian—right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson)—who has headed off to talk some more on this. His speech focused on why these events matter to young people and why we must have the sites commemorated appropriately, particularly for those who lost their lives at sea.

This Department has given £10 million to deliver events over the past four years. In addition, there has also been a mix of programmes from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence, and that is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) gave us some great, positive news about a statue to commemorate Sikh soldiers and spoke about unity, integration and all-important diversity. Creating such a memorial 100 years on is the right thing to do.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) told us about the shamrock poppy, which is rightly being worn in the House of Commons
to show this is a common cause. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) talked about a devotion to duty, thanked his loved ones and mentioned the impact of the war on friends and family. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the bravery of the Commonwealth—local heroes from Reading and those from across the world—and mentioned clubs and charities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) reminded us not to forget about our furry friends—the animals who were casualties of war and who were taken by their owners to an unknown fate. He also told us about learning lessons from his grandfather and said that the first step in preventing this from happening again is never to forget. In the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we heard from a serviceman, who spoke about the new generation, uniformed cadets and young people always willing to serve.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) rightly raised the importance of culture. The 14-18 NOW project has engaged 35 million people, immersing them in cultural integration activities. We heard my right hon. Friend’s poetry oration, and he spoke about the horror of war and the sacrifice for rightful freedom.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about the trenches and the sunflowers in Gallipoli, and he told us about emotional sacrifice and terrible stories of the “goodnight kiss”. It was a passionate and brave contribution, highlighting that, moments before the Armistice, we still lost our brave men.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about people coming home from war, including the story that the men left in one town were only enough to fill three pews in the church. He said that the huge effort of valour must always be remembered, and he reminded us that 20,000 men and boys were lost on the first day of the battle of the Somme.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) gave us a precious reflection on the Devonshires and spoke of the emancipation of women that came through the war—the gallantry of our men, and the impact of our women. I thank him for the huge amount of work he has done for this commemoration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) rightly told us about the bravery of our allies and the impact on Canadians, the US, Australians and people from New Zealand. He spoke of the struggle to return to normality after knowing such pain and of soldiers coming from foreign lands to do their duty.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the sacrifice given to continue trade links and the connections between the Welsh and the Irish through Holyhead. He told us of 500 lives lost one night at sea; we will remember them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke about Northumberland’s proud work to put together such a huge amount of battalions. There were 52 battalions and the regiment was awarded five VCs. She made a passionate, brave and typically emotional speech. She also spoke about the submarines, and it was news to me how dangerous serving on submarines could be.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for speaking about the importance of local cemeteries and about the Heritage Lottery Fund, which has done so much, contributing £96 million to over 2,000 projects to mark the centenary.

I find it so difficult not to mention everybody, but an important contribution for me was that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke about his great-grandmother—the foreboding matriarch who paid him 10p to put whisky in her tea. He mentioned the 1.7 million “surplus women” and quoted a headmistress who is said to have told girls, “You must make your way in the world as best you can,” after they lost brothers and others lost sons and they could perhaps have become the maiden generation.

I pay tribute to the huge amount of people who have been pivotal in the commemorations that we have been discussing, including the Royal British Legion, which has been at the heart of so much important activity over the last four years. In my constituency, Norman Brown MBE personally raised £1 million over 25 years to give to the Legion. The tireless community work done by people across the UK is incredible, and they are rightly well regarded. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, as we have heard, has sensitively maintained 23,000 sites in over 150 countries across the world.

I thank all hon. Members who have done so much. In particular, we have seen the remarkable contribution from the Prime Minister’s special representative for the first world war commemorations, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whose work over six years in delivering these commemorations has been exceptional, alongside the hon. Member for Barnsley Central. I thank all our important devolved Administrations who, as we heard, do so much across the UK and across the world.

It has been heartening to see this House come together to pay tribute to those who tragically paid the ultimate price. We rightly thank all those who went to serve their country and all those who continue to serve their country, to show them that all they have done is right because it has protected our precious freedom. The parliamentary prayer said that we should unite and knit together, in the spirit of recognition and peace, as we reflect on the centenary of the end of a war that brought so much bloodshed and so much horror. Let us all pledge that the sentiments expressed today over in St Margaret’s Church will remain in our thoughts today and over the weekend and in our hearts forever. We will remember them.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.——[Iain Stewart.]

7.56 pm

House adjourned.
Autism and Learning Disability Training: Healthcare Professionals

Monday 22 October 2018

[ Dame Cheryl Gillan in the Chair ]

Autism and Learning Disability Training: Healthcare Professionals

4.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 221033 relating to autism and learning disability training for healthcare professionals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. You are an expert in this issue and have campaigned on it for many years. I am sure you wish you could be contributing to the debate.

The petition text is particularly important, so I shall start by reading it to inform hon. Members fully and to put it on the record. Paula McGowan, the petitioner, wrote:

"My son Oliver was only 18 when he died in hospital on 11 November 2016. I believe his death could have been prevented if his doctors and nurses had received mandatory training. He had autism and a mild learning disability, and they weren't trained to understand how to make reasonable adjustments for him. One in four healthcare professionals has never had training on learning disability or autism. This is unacceptable. Two thirds want more training, and one in three think a lack of Government qualifications, was a member of the school council and head prefect. He was a fit and active teenage boy and yet on the day he died in hospital, as did we, providing letters from previous consultant doctors explaining Oliver's reactions to medications and busy hospital environments.

Previously, when these exceptionally strong medications had been trialled to help Oliver's anxiety in seizures, we had seen Oliver's behaviour change in a way we had never seen before: hallucinating, tearing at his skin with significant increase in seizure activity. We knew that Oliver was not psychotic or mentally ill. Previous senior psychiatric consultants had said the same thing, that Oliver was not psychotic or mentally ill but a teenager who had high functioning autism and a mild learning disability impacted by partial seizures. They wrote he was sensitive to medication, especially benzodiazepines. The doctors in A&E wrote 'antipsychotic medication' in red in the allergies box on all of Oliver's ICU patient 24 hour care charts. The A&E doctor also sent an email to all doctors treating Oliver that he was sensitive to all antipsychotic medications.

Oliver was sedated and placed on life support in A&E to investigate his seizures. A few days later, whilst Oliver was still on life support and against Oliver's and our strong wishes, he was given an antipsychotic drug called Olanzapine. Doctors said it was to control his anxiety when he woke up, even though we explained to them that when any seizures had finished Oliver immediately returned to his normal mild mannered self.

Oliver never woke up; the Olanzapine caused him to develop Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome, or NMS. His brain swelled so immediately returned to his normal mild mannered self. He had a mild learning disability, mild cerebral palsy, and partial seizures. I will read his mother's account of what happened. She is waging a powerful and brave campaign. As she told me, nothing can bring Oliver back, but she wants to ensure that lessons are learned properly, so that in future, others will be safer. She would very much have contributed to this important debate have faced a difficult choice, which is perhaps why we are relatively few.

I will start with some background. In 2016, Oliver McGowan died in hospital. He was autistic and had a mild learning disability, mild cerebral palsy, and partial seizures. I will read his mother's account of what happened. She is waging a powerful and brave campaign. As she told me, nothing can bring Oliver back, but she wants to ensure that lessons are learned properly, so that in future, others will be safer. She would very much have liked to deliver the account herself, but under Parliament's current rules, it is not possible for her to speak in the debate. Her account is lengthy, but it is important that it is heard in full. This is Oliver's story, in his mother's words:

"Oliver enjoyed college, playing football and was an amazing athlete, in training to become a Paralympian. Oliver loved life and being with his family. He was bright, achieving GCSE and BTEC qualifications, was a member of the school council and head prefect. He was a fit and active teenage boy and yet on the 11 November 2016, aged 18, he died in Southmead hospital, Bristol, in circumstances that his family believe were entirely avoidable. When we brought him to A&E with absence type seizures, we thought he would be in hospital for a couple of days at the most, and he would go to college the following week as planned.

"Oliver had mild hemiplegia, absence type partial seizures and a very mild learning disability as a result of having meningitis as a baby. He also had high functioning autism. His additional needs were not obvious to most people, but anxiety was a challenge for him.

When Oliver turned 17, his absence type seizures increased and on several occasions he had to spend time in hospital for investigations. His seizures caused him to become anxious, scared and agitated and due to this, his high functioning autism became more obvious.

In October 2016, aged 18, Oliver was admitted to an adult hospital having absence type partial seizures. Oliver explained the seizures as being like several bees buzzing down one's ears whilst you are trying to think and go about your day; incredibly frustrating and distracting. He was conscious throughout and was very scared and anxious.

Several doctors were talking to Oliver at once, using complex language that was hard to understand. When Oliver wanted to walk around (a normal part of his seizure activity) he was restrained by several members of staff, which heightened his anxiety.

Oliver had said clearly to the ambulance staff, he was happy to go to hospital, but he did not want to be given antipsychotic medicine, giving sound reasoning, stating 'they mess with my brain and make my eyes go funny'. He said this again in the hospital, as did we, providing letters from previous consultant doctors explaining Oliver's reactions to medications and busy hospital environments.

Previously, when these exceptionally strong medications had been trialled to help Oliver's anxiety in seizures, we had seen Oliver's behaviour change in a way we had never seen before: hallucinating, tearing at his skin with significant increase in seizure activity. We knew that Oliver was not psychotic or mentally ill. Previous senior psychiatric consultants had said the same thing, that Oliver was not psychotic or mentally ill but a teenager who had high functioning autism and a mild learning disability impacted by partial seizures. They wrote he was sensitive to medication, especially benzodiazepines. The doctors in A&E wrote 'antipsychotic medication' in red in the allergies box on all of Oliver's ICU patient 24 hour care charts. The A&E doctor also sent an email to all doctors treating Oliver that he was sensitive to all antipsychotic medications.

Oliver was sedated and placed on life support in A&E to investigate his seizures. A few days later, whilst Oliver was still on life support and against Oliver's and our strong wishes, he was given an antipsychotic drug called Olanzapine. Doctors said it was to control his anxiety when he woke up, even though we explained to them that when any seizures had finished Oliver immediately returned to his normal mild mannered self.

Oliver never woke up; the Olanzapine caused him to develop Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome, or NMS. His brain swelled so badly it was bulging out of the base of his skull causing irreversible brain damage. We were told that Oliver would be blind, deaf, no memory, no speech and would be reliant on breathing machines including tube fed.

Oliver died on Armistice Day, a fitting day given Oliver's father is a serving senior officer in the Air Force and Oliver had lived his whole life as a military child. We can all agree that Oliver was certainly a very brave young man."

Paula goes on to say:

"If the doctors and nurses had been trained to understand how to make reasonable adjustments for him (someone with autism and a mild learning disability), they would have known how to adapt the environment to meet his needs. There would have been no need to use a 'chemical restraint' and he would not have had the NMS reaction to this type of medication.

If doctors and nurses had had the training to support Oliver's medical, social and emotional needs effectively, they would have known how to adapt their communication, using humour to settle his anxiety in a crisis, and de-escalate the situation further. They
made a decision about how to manage potentially challenging behaviour as Oliver came out of sedation. They did not properly explore alternatives to using antipsychotic medication. A senior safeguarding nurse had advised a non-pharmaceutical approach.

There was time to do this and consult with other professionals who knew Oliver best and were treating him in the community, as he was sedated and stable in intensive care. This did not happen although there was time.

I believe that ignorance of learning disability and autism cost Oliver his life, and we must never allow this to happen again. I believe that if Oliver hadn’t had a diagnosis of autism and a learning disability, and presented in hospital with the same symptoms, he would not have been prescribed an antipsychotic. Oliver’s death is not an isolated case, with evidence in relation to learning disability showing 1,200 avoidable deaths every year, and women with a learning disability dying nearly 30 years earlier than the general population.”

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I can see that my hon. Friend is coming to the end of his peroration, so I thought I would intervene briefly. I understand that the Government have announced a review, but does he not agree that something a little more urgent is needed?

Daniel Zeichner: I am not coming quite to the end, but I have almost reached the close of Paula’s statement. I think my hon. Friend will understand from the suggestions later in my speech that I absolutely agree with her conclusion.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not find it shocking and surprising that younger people with autism or learning difficulties have a higher incidence of dying in hospital than older people living with those conditions? It is hard to know exactly why that is, but he is discussing the case of a very young man that resulted in a completely unnecessary death.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady is very expert on such issues. I, too, am struck by that statistic. I do not know the answer, but it is the kind of thing we need to find out about.

To conclude Paula’s statement:

“Mencap’s Death by Indifference report, published ten years ago, set out many areas of concern behind a voidable death, and those findings have been built on by the detailed information now coming out of the national mortality review (LeDeR) process. Mencap’s Treat me well campaign report states that 1 in 4 doctors and nurses has never had any training on learning disability. This was our experience and is unacceptable, that’s why I launched this Government petition for all doctors and nurses to receive appropriate higher level mandatory training which could have saved Oliver’s life.

There needs to be a culture change in the way people with autism and a learning disability are treated by NHS doctors and nurses. This needs to be led from the top down by doctors and the GMC. It is not acceptable that people who have autism and learning disabilities die for no other reason than health professionals have not been properly trained on how to support them and work outside the limits of the medical model. We must do everything in our power to prevent future deaths like Oliver’s from happening again.”

That is Paula McGowan’s account. She started this petition to Parliament calling for mandatory autism and learning disability training for healthcare workers. The petition now has more than 50,000 signatures, and Paula is present in the Public Gallery to watch our proceedings.

An inquest has found that the medication was not wrongly prescribed, but Oliver’s family and Mencap were very unhappy with the inquest’s conduct and conclusions. The family firmly believes that better understanding of Oliver’s autism could have prevented his death. Paula believes passionately that Oliver’s experiences should lead to change, so that a lack of understanding does not result in future deaths.

There have been other cases such as Oliver’s, and every premature death of young person who is autistic or has a learning disability is a tragedy that we should be able to avoid. When Connor Sparrowhawk—or LB, as he is known—passed away in Slade House in Oxford, his mother called for:

“An effective demonstration by the NHS to making provision for learning disabled people a complete and integral part of the health and care services provided rather than add on, ad hoc and (easily ignored) specialist provision.”

There are, sadly, many other cases. Only last week, for example, a high-profile case was in the media about Bethany, aged 17, who has autism and extreme anxiety. She, it seems, has been locked in a seclusion room for almost two years.

Last week, I met a local volunteer-led group, Caring for Cambridgeshire’s Homeless, who help homeless people in Cambridge. I was introduced to a 21-year-old man with autism and learning disabilities who is living on the streets. His safe place: behind a wheelie bin, at the back of a shop. His case is complex, but while volunteer interventions are a lifeline for that young man, he should be getting professional medical support from those trained to understand his needs.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent, John Hobbs, whose grandson is autistic, about the need for a national database for autism and associated conditions designed for the purposes of splitting the autism spectrum into subsets?

Daniel Zeichner: I am not sure that I am sufficiently expert to answer that question straight off, because it is a complicated one, but it is certainly worth looking into further.

I shall explain some wider issues too. This weekend, I attended the excellent Volunteer for Cambridge event organised by Cambridge City Council and volunteer services, where I met Heather Lord from Cambridgeshire Healthwatch and Tara Forkin from Cambridgeshire Deaf Association. Tara told me, through the signer, about the experiences of deaf people in the health system. They, too, find that treatment is sometimes administered to them in ways they find baffling and frightening, too often with no one finding a way to listen to them. As Heather rightly asked, almost 25 years after the controversies around the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which some of us still remember, why are people continuing to have to fight the battle? Why is it not yet won?

This subject is clearly highly sensitive. The examples I have given highlight heartbreaking incidents. Clearly, we must work harder and put measures in place to ensure that other people are kept safe after we as a society have failed Oliver, LB and 1,200 other avoidable deaths each year, according to research by Mencap. Even more remains to be done, however.
We must go back to the very beginning, as access to healthcare from the start can be extremely difficult for those with autism or learning disabilities. Seemingly simple tasks—to most of us—such as making an appointment over the phone, are a barrier to many of them. If we cannot make an appointment, or if we feel anxious about doing so, we are less likely to seek healthcare, even if we are experiencing symptoms that others would immediately refer to a doctor.

Some autistic people and people with learning disabilities find expressing themselves difficult, especially if that includes discussing intimate personal health issues, whether physical or mental. Some learning disabilities or types of autism make it harder for people to work out the sensations that their bodies are feeling, which can make it more difficult for them to realise that they are ill or need support. In terms of mental health, the group therapy sessions, for example, which work so well for some people, are often inaccessible to those with autism, who can feel very socially anxious.

Last week, the all-party parliamentary group on mental health, of which I am a vice chair, published its review, “Progress of the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health: On the road to parity”, which underlined the mental health inequalities that I have been discussing. That report recommends:

“Health Education England should improve development and training of frontline care staff with a specific focus on mental health, learning disability and autism so the existing workforce is supported and equipped to deliver direct care and support to those groups.”

The report explains:

“We heard that people with learning disability or autism (or both) routinely have their referrals to mental health services turned down because some services ‘do not accept referrals from that group’. Mental illness presents very differently in people with a learning disability or autism. As a result, symptoms of mental illness can be wrongly attributed to a person’s learning disability or autism meaning that this group does not receive the treatment they need for their mental health problems.”

Also, according to the report, the esteemed Baroness Hollins, a leading member of the APPG inquiry, emphasised throughout that

“services are legally obliged to implement reasonable adjustments so people with learning disability or autism or both can engage with mental health services. This doesn’t appear to be happening.”

Many doctors and nurses of course strive to understand autism and learning disabilities, and to adapt their practice to better cater for those needs, but with increased pressures on staffing and endless demands on the time of medical professionals, alongside increased demand, that will inevitably not be the case for every single individual in the NHS. We must better equip and empower our healthcare workers.

With the right training, doctors and nurses can help autistic people and those with learning disabilities feel more comfortable and, ultimately, receive better, more focused healthcare. Everyone working in the NHS will see autistic and learning-disabled people, even if unaware of it. Some of those workers could have an inaccurate or narrow view of what someone with a learning disability looks like, or of the traits of an autistic person, due to inaccurate stereotypes or unhelpful media representation of such conditions. All frontline staff, therefore, from GP receptionists to consultants in accident and emergency, should receive some evidence-led training about autism. The development of that training should be informed by autistic people and their families.

Paula McGowan has called for doctors and nurses to receive advanced training—tier 2—in autism and learning disability as soon as is reasonably practicable. She expressed to me that it must cover legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the Mental Health Act 1983, focusing on key areas such as reasonable adjustments to care, consent and best-interests decision making. She would like it to be “mandatory that Oliver’s story should be used as a case study in all training”, and for the training to be named after him: the Oliver McGowan mandatory training. As Members present will agree, Oliver’s story carries huge weight, and attaching his name will exemplify the training’s deserved importance.

We need to focus on supporting the health professionals who see autistic people and people with learning disabilities most often to understand the nuances of their health. The community is diverse, and some of the physical and mental health problems those people experience require responses different from those required by non-autistic or non-disabled people.

Dr Whitford: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I speak as a breast cancer surgeon of more than 30 years. The issue lies not so much with medical and nursing staff, who deal often with autistic people or people with learning disabilities, but with the people who do not deal with them often. It is those people—people in A&E and other hospital departments—who do not have the skills who really need training.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. Training needs to be provided to all staff, but absolutely, those who are not exposed to such people are a particular issue.

My comments so far have been decidedly non-partisan, and I hope Members from across the House are able to support most of what I have suggested. However, before concluding, I must make some observations about the staffing pressures that affect our public services—particularly changes to student nursing bursaries.

We have heard in the House many times that the current financial settlement for student nurses is insufficient given the intensity of their courses. I and many others believe that nursing students need bespoke financial support if the Government are to meet their commitment to growing the nursing workforce. Those students need support for living costs to incentivise a wider range of applications. There are many ways that can be done—through universal grants for students in recognition of their placements, means-tested grants to maintain diversity or targeted support for parents and carers, as many nursing students come to university later in life.

Since the coalition Government came to power in 2010, specialist areas such as learning disability and mental health nursing have been the worst hit by the wider staffing crisis. Those specialties struggle to recruit, since mature students are particularly likely to choose them. The Royal College of Nursing reports that there are 40.5% fewer learning disability nurses—2,176 fewer full-time equivalent nurses—today than in 2010. Despite Government claims, the removal of the NHS bursary in England failed to increase the number of nursing students.
Recent data shows that the number of students accepted on to nursing courses in England has fallen by a further 4% in the past year, and by 8% since student funding was removed in 2016.

Intelligence from RCN regional networks indicates that directors of nursing across England are escalating concerns about course provision. They are concerned about the stark regional variation in course provision for learning disability nursing—particularly the risk of course closures in the south of England—which may exacerbate existing regional workforce supply disparities.

The huge workforce pressure risks poorer care for learning disabled people. A commitment from the Government to encourage students into learning disability nursing may improve standards of care and patient safety.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, while Brexit dominates much of our time in Parliament, we must also have the opportunity to debate and get into the granular detail of important issues such as the one he highlights?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. We could probably find favour across the House and across the country for moving on from some issues at the moment, but she is absolutely right—that stress, which stems from a lack of resources, staffing, beds and specialist care, can lead to a culture in which it is difficult to provide personalised care and have the confidence to deviate from established procedure.

Let me conclude on a slightly more optimistic note. In September, in a written statement in response to the learning disability mortality review, the Minister committed to completing a public consultation on proposals for mandatory learning disability training for all health and care staff. However, that change must be quick—we cannot afford it to end up, like so many Government initiatives, in endless consultation and no action.

In England, there is a duty in the Autism Act 2009 statutory guidance for all health and care staff to have appropriate autism training, but the implementation of that duty is poor. In response to a 2016 Public Health England survey, only 17% of localities reported having training plans for all health and care staff, while 10% reported having no plan in place. The Government must commit to mandatory autism training as well as learning disability training.

The National Autistic Society reminds us: “In August, NHS England announced that autism, alongside learning disability, will be one of its four clinical priorities in the upcoming 10-year plan to improve health services. This is a great step towards making sure that autistic people are supported by the NHS just like anyone else. Alongside tackling long diagnosis waiting times and supporting good mental health, we believe that the Long Term Plan should outline a comprehensive national training programme for all health staff.”

The learning disability mortality review, which was published in May, found that men with a learning disability die on average 22.8 years earlier than the general population, while women die 29.3 years earlier. Autistica’s research shows that autistic adults without a learning disability are nine times more likely than non-autistic adults to die from suicide—a truly shocking statistic. Mencap’s research shows that almost a quarter—23%—of healthcare professionals have never received training on learning disabilities, and almost half believe that has contributed to avoidable deaths. Beyond nurses and doctors, we need to train NHS workers such as receptionists and facilities managers on how small adjustments can hugely increase access for disabled and autistic people.

I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Paula McGowan’s powerful testimony shines a clear light on what needs to be done. The case is clear. We cannot risk any more cases like Oliver’s. This cannot afford to wait.

4.57 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Thank you for culling me to speak, Dame Cheryl. I recognise your expertise and knowledge in this area. As one of the leading Members of the House, you have worked tirelessly to represent the rights of those with autism, and you took the Autism Act through Parliament. My comments will pale in comparison. Your position today prevents you from speaking, but I want those watching the debate to know how indebted Members on both sides of the House are to you for your efforts.

I speak in my capacity as the Member of Parliament for Kingswood, near Bristol. My constituent, Paula McGowan, has worked tirelessly and courageously to highlight the tragic death of her son, Oliver McGowan, on 11 November 2016. Paula’s work to establish Oliver’s campaign and call for mandatory autism and learning disability training for NHS professionals led to the creation of a petition, which had been signed by 51,310 people as of around 3 pm. I am extremely grateful to the Petitions Committee for scheduling this debate on that petition.

I speak as Paula’s local representative, but what she has achieved in the face of such extreme grief and anguish is so remarkable that, in all honesty, she should...
be telling Oliver’s story in this debate. That story is awful and harrowing, but it needs to be told. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for putting Paula’s testimony on the record. She sent me some additional personal words. It is important that I place those words on the record, too, not only for the benefit of Members present but so that they stand as a testament to Oliver and so that his death is remembered eternally in the House’s official record, Hansard.

Paula states:

“From the moment Oliver was born, we knew that he was special and our love for him was overwhelming. Oliver was born premature and developed meningitis at three weeks of age. He was very ill and we were told they did not expect him to survive. However, Oliver began to recover. Everybody who came into contact with Oliver warmed to him and could not resist spending time with this baby.

Sadly, Oliver developed a second episode of meningitis and was incredibly ill. Amazingly, against all odds and many months of hospital treatment, Oliver’s strength and determination shone through and he survived once again, and as always with that beautiful heart warming smile that everybody was drawn to. Oliver—as a result of an infarction caused by the meningitis—was left with mild cerebral palsy, focal epilepsy and later on a diagnosis of high functioning autism.

Oliver’s disabilities did not hold him back. He had a can do attitude and amazed everybody with his achievements. He played for South and North West Centres of Excellence England development football squads. He was a registered athlete with the Power of 10 and was ranked 3rd best in the country for athletics. Oliver was a member of Team Bath and was being trained to become a Paralympian.

Oliver was a natural leader and became a prefect and chair of the school council, later college. He attained several GCSE and BTEC examinations. He went on to attend National Star College in Cheltenham. Their opinions of Oliver were very complimentary, writing how he was often mistaken to be a member of staff; how friendly and kind he was, supporting students who were less able than himself; his wicked sense of humour; and the aspirations they had for him to start a sports course at a local ski centre.

Oliver brought so much happiness and fun to our lives; he always saw the best in everything and taught all of us how to look at things differently. Oliver never failed to light up a room with the sound of his laughter. He wanted to make everybody happy and did his best to achieve that. Despite his limitations, he never complained or asked, ‘Why me?’ He accepted everything and always with a smile. His courage and enthusiasm was inspirational. We were told by his neurologist that Oliver had a full life expectancy and it was expected he would live an independent life with a little support.

On 15 October 2015, Oliver was admitted to a children’s hospital, having what we—his parents—and college staff recognised to be simple partial seizures. These caused Oliver to be anxious, agitated and confused. After several weeks of tests Oliver was discharged home and given sertraline—an antidepressant medication—to treat his anxiety. Sadly, Oliver was sensitive to antipsychotics and benzodiazepines. He was given different antipsychotic medications and he was discharged after a few days into the care of a community psychiatrist. Oliver was again given different antipsychotics and meals. He was reassured by doctors they had no intention of using antipsychotic medication olanzapine at a low dose that evening.

The team was very supportive and specialised in people with autism and learning difficulties. A consultant psychiatrist in learning disability wrote that Oliver was not psychotic or mentally ill. He believed Oliver’s behaviours were a result of autism and mild learning difficulties and an environment that was not adapted to meet his needs.

Sadly, on 16 October 2016, Oliver had a cluster of seizures and was admitted to an adult general hospital. Oliver told ambulance staff and also doctors in A&E not to give him any antipsychotic medications as they made him feel anxious. He was reassured by doctors they had no intention of using those medications. We gave doctors a folder of supporting letters stating Oliver’s reaction to antipsychotic medications, and it was subsequently written in bold red ink on Oliver’s medical care sheets he was intolerant to all antipsychotics.

Oliver was intubated. The safeguarding officer was consulted on how to manage Oliver’s anxiety when sedation was reduced. His advice to the doctors was a non-pharmaceutical approach and to use soft handcuffs. We were told we should be present as we would be able to reassure and comfort him. We were told that most people would become highly anxious when woken from being sedated. This advice was not listened to and sedation was reduced without our presence. According to staff, Oliver became anxious. He would have felt scared waking to find tubes in his throat and in unfamiliar surroundings without familiar faces. Full sedation was increased.

We were consulted by a neuropsychiatrist who had met Oliver for two 10 minute appointments in the community. She asked us about giving Oliver an antipsychotic. We made it very clear about Oliver’s previous reactions to this type of medication and that she did NOT have Oliver’s or our permission to administer any antipsychotic medications. Despite this, Oliver was given the antipsychotic medication olanzapine at a low dose that evening.
without our knowledge. The next day, we again made it clear to all doctors and nurses that they did not have Oliver's permission to administer this.

Oliver, over the next few days, developed a temperature of 42°. Because doctors said his liver function was elevated he was not given any medication to control the temperature other than a light blow up mattress filled with cold air. This was not effective. Doctors could not understand the decline in Oliver's condition and ordered a scan of his head and lungs. Unfortunately it was several more days before they scanned his brain. It was so badly swollen it was bulging out the base of his skull. We were told Oliver had neuroepileptic malignant syndrome, a rare but serious side effect of antipsychotic medications.

A week later, the decision was made to turn Oliver's life support machines off. Oliver passed away several days later on 11 November 2016: Armistice Day—poignant given we are a military family."

Paula continues:

"Oliver's was a life wasted due to doctors not communicating effectively with family and practitioners who knew him well and who were in daily contact with the hospital. We believe the doctors were arrogant and ignorant and believed they knew Oliver better than his parents. They did not consult wider, when there was ample opportunity to do so.

We have since been told by the doctor who administered the antipsychotic drug that she would have given it regardless of our wishes, as she believed it was in Oliver's best interests, and she would do the same thing again given the same situation knowing that Oliver has lost his life. We understand that many people receive the medications that Oliver was given, often for managing a mental health condition, and do so without suffering the effects that Oliver had. In Oliver's case, we had clear understanding that he was sensitive to these medications and we believe they should not have been prescribed.

We believe that Oliver's death was very preventable. We believe that Oliver was given excessive drugs due to medical staff not understanding autism impacted by seizure activity. They did not ever try to adapt the environment to meet his needs, but used excessive restraint methods. They failed to make any communication with community-based professionals who were working with Oliver on a daily basis and knew him well."

A later inquest into Oliver's death concluded that the care Oliver received in the lead-up to his death was "appropriate". It stated that despite warnings from Oliver and his parents, the development of complications from medication could not have been predicted. As a local Member of Parliament, I was in contact with Paula after Oliver passed away to support her when she approached the local police and coroner's office to ask for an investigation into the death of her son. I will continue to offer all the support that I can.

In spite of that inquest's conclusions, the Government's learning disabilities mortality review programme, which investigated Oliver's case, highlighted the challenges that vulnerable people such as Oliver still face in gaining access to appropriate care. There remain serious disparities in the quality of health support and care received by people with autism and learning disabilities. The evidence shows, as has already been mentioned, that people with learning disabilities die at a far greater rate than others. Often, that can be prevented with the right care and support and better awareness and training.

Recent reports from Mencap, which has been recognised for its ongoing efforts and campaigns, found that one in four doctors and nurses has never had any type of training on learning disability. Clearly, that is unacceptable. Every person should receive the same high quality of care, whether or not they have a learning disability. Although we have made progress in our collective understanding of autism and learning disabilities, much more needs to be done to ensure that vulnerable people receive the right support from our healthcare system when they need it most. I am encouraged that the Government have accepted all the recommendations from the learning disabilities mortality review, including recommendation 6, which proposes the introduction of mandatory training for all health and care staff. I am also pleased that they have committed to delivering that training in partnership with people with experience, including families and parents like Paula.

I welcome the Government's proposals for a consultation on options for delivering that essential training to staff, which is due to be completed by the end of March 2019. With that in mind, I would welcome it being arranged for Paula to meet the Minister to discuss Oliver's campaign and its consequences, and for this work to continue. I would also welcome the Minister and the Department continuing their close working with Mencap, the National Autistic Society, other charities and relevant organisations, and indeed Members of Parliament such as the Solicitor General, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland)—he is in his place but his ministerial role affords that he cannot speak in the debate—who have personal experience of autism. It is right to draw on that.

Lyn Brown: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman and have been really affected by his speech; I am sure he has been affected as the local MP. I pay tribute to him for how he is putting his case, but does he not agree that the review is unnecessary and that what we actually need is some action now?

Chris Skidmore: I agree that we need clarity, not only extra guidance. The review is one step in a journey that has yet to be completed. I own up to this, having been a Minister previously: there is a commitment to looking at guidance and training, but I am concerned with the implementation. Going forward, we could produce all the training, guidance and material we want, but how will we monitor the outcomes? What are we seeking to achieve?

A couple of months into my job as a Minister in the Cabinet Office, having previously been secretary of the all-party parliamentary group for disability as a Back Bencher, I wanted to look at how we could increase and encourage electoral registration among those with learning disabilities. The answer I got was, "Well, there is guidance out there already, Minister. The Electoral Commission has produced documentation." However, it was patently clear to me that it was not being implemented in polling stations across the country. I would like to see a commitment from the Minister not just for consultation and guidance to be produced but to ensure that we have accountability. The Care Quality Commission must be involved, and people must be judged on the standards introduced; this must be followed through.

In conclusion—this may chime with what the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said—I return to the words of Paula McGowan:

"If the guidelines and principles from NHS England's STOMP—stopping the over-medication of people who have learning disabilities—project had been followed with healthcare professionals
being able to listen to family and specialist colleagues, then we firmly believe that Oliver would still be here today. We believe that Oliver’s premature death should be in the public’s interest, and I challenge the Government to: ask people with a learning disability, autism or both, their families and carers for their opinion and concerns about treatment; listen to all involved and show respect to those opinions and concerns; and do something about it and work in partnership with us. Specifically, NHS professionals who provide specialist care in learning disability and autism should: put people at the heart of all decision making; respect our point of view; not make decisions without us; and enable us to understand complex decisions in a way that is relevant to all and provide information and explanation.

In particular, check if your patient has a hospital passport. Respect your patient by getting down to the same level as them—don’t stand if your patient is sitting. Give them personal space. Modify your language so that it is clear and precise, and don’t use medical jargon. Check your patient has understood what you are saying. Effectively listen to your patient. Give your patient time. Make them feel valued and included in their treatment plan. Mostly—above all—“offer reassurance. In addition, liaise with healthcare colleagues in general hospitals to raise awareness and understanding of learning disability, autism and the principles of STOMP. And, above all, do everything in your power to prevent a story like Oliver’s from having to be told again.”

From my own point of view, I hope that we can all work together to ensure that we do not have to stand here again, making the case for change. Let us support Oliver’s campaign and ensure that his death marks a watershed moment and a turning point in how we treat those with autism and learning disabilities in the NHS.

5.14 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for a moving and harrowing account of what happened to Oliver, and to the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), the local MP, who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue.

I also pay tribute to Paula McGowan, who has shown such bravery in campaigning for her son. She and her family have felt such suffering following the death of Oliver nearly two years ago—I cannot imagine the pain of losing a child. I speak for all Members when I say that our thoughts are with her and her family.

The cross-party support for the petition shows the strength of feeling of all Members of this House, who want those with learning difficulties and disabilities to receive the best possible treatment. We all want to see the treatment they need. On that, Mencap’s comments of healthcare professionals—64%—said that a lack of practical resources for them and their colleagues contributes to the problem of avoidable deaths. That is shocking. Just over a quarter of those with autism or learning disabilities, preventing them from receiving the treatment they need. On that, Mencap’s statistics are striking: just under two thirds of healthcare professionals—64%—said that a lack of practical resources for them and their colleagues contributes to the problem of avoidable deaths.

Programmes such as Treat Me Right are proving to be an effective remedy. Trainers explain clearly how autism or their own learning disability feels for them, so NHS staff can learn about uniquely challenging situations that may arise during the course of their work. In addition to training, the programme offers two tailored health toolkits for people with autism—health action plans and health passports—which are essential for signposting the critical adjustments necessary on their arrival at A&E and other departments.

The Government’s response to the review talks of ensuring “vigilant and proactive support for people with a learning disability.”

How better to achieve that than through mandatory training, and who better to lead that training than those who know the specifics of living with autism or a learning disability?

I welcomed John, a co-founder of Treat Me Right, to Parliament earlier in the year. He felt strongly that the training programme allowed him to share his experience of living with Down’s syndrome with NHS professionals to tangible effect. His experience is reflected in the comments of healthcare professionals across Hampstead and Kilburn who have benefited from training by Treat Me Right. The team at Brent psychological services said that the training, especially on autism spectrum disorders, was like “receiving a pair of glasses after not knowing you needed them.”
Such testimonies, and the fact that approximately 3,300 adults are registered with Brent CCG as having been diagnosed with a learning disability, mean that the work of Treat Me Right could eventually offer vital healthcare support to thousands of my constituents who have been suffering for years.

Kerry McCarthy: It sounds like a fantastic organisation. I wonder whether those lessons could also be rolled out to other public services. I have been talking to Avon and Somerset police, where there have been issues about tasering people who clearly should have been treated differently. Does my hon. Friend agree, particularly as the criminal justice system and the police often come into contact with people with autism and do not know how to treat them?

Tulip Siddiq: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that the issue is not confined to the healthcare services. It crosses borders, and she made an effective point about the police and others dealing with the challenges of autism that arise in everyday life.

Hannah Bardell: On a similar point, does the hon. Lady agree that staff in the Department for Work and Pensions should also be trained? Some of my constituents have not had positive experiences of the welfare system. I know that the staff have a difficult job, but often people are marginalised because of a lack of understanding.

Tulip Siddiq: Similar things come up in my surgeries. People come in and complain bitterly about the way they have been treated, simply because they have not been understood by service providers, whether at the Department for Work and Pensions when they needed social security, or elsewhere.

I would like the Minister to address how she will ensure that those with learning disabilities and their families will be treated as equal partners in setting targets for success and in deciding whether change is happening in the right way. How does she anticipate that all healthcare professionals, and not just a few, will get good quality learning disability training, and how will the challenge of resourcing that be met? We have heard Mencap’s estimate that 1,200 people with learning disabilities die every year because of an avoidable lack of access to good healthcare: it was pointed out earlier in the debate that it seems more deaths are of young people, which is shocking. I hope that the Minister will address that situation, which is simply horrifying. I hope that, in addition to answering my specific questions, she will explain how her Department is accelerating its priorities in the 10-year plan published last month.

I pay tribute once again to Paula McGowan and those seated in the Public Gallery today, because I know it has been a difficult campaign so far.

5.23 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this evening. Dame Cheryl; we are debating an issue on which you have done much, not only to raise awareness, but to transform the legislative framework in which we operate. I thank the Petitions Committee for ensuring that time was made available for the debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on his opening speech. I pay tribute to Oliver’s family in particular, and to the many other families who have done so much and worked so hard, exhausting reserves of energy and emotion that I am not sure many of us could have found, to ensure that some public benefit can come from their individual personal tragedies.

I have rather less direct personal experience of autism than many of the Members who will contribute today, but as a former governor at a special needs school that had a particular focus on autism I am familiar with many of the issues that Members have raised. As of last week I am a proud officer of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. I am fortunate to benefit from the fact that many constituents contact me to give me advice and tell me of their and their families’ experience in the healthcare system. I also benefit from the advice and experience of my former colleagues, the staff and governors at the school, and the National Autistic Society, which does much important work to push forward the agenda.

As has already been said, there are clear healthcare inequalities between people who have autism and the general population. That is clearly recognised by the Government. It was recognised in their mandate to NHS England and, of course, as one of four clinical priorities in the 10-year plan published last month. Those inequalities clearly have many causes. There are many co-factors more likely to affect people who have autism, such as issues to do with unemployment, mental health and poverty; but one of the most obvious ones, which is referred to in the petition, is the interaction between the national health service and healthcare professionals, and people with autism.

For many of us it can be hard to decipher what medical professionals tell us, particularly when we are very ill and perhaps not thinking as straight as we might. For people with learning disabilities and communication difficulties, the difficulty is on an entirely different scale. For many people with autism it is a question of heightened difficulty not only in understanding what they are being told, but also, of course, in communicating how they feel physically, emotionally and mentally. It is therefore essential that understanding of autism becomes part of the mandatory training for healthcare professionals, just as it is finally becoming a core part of initial teacher training.

Like other hon. Members, I am pleased to see that the new core skills education and training framework finally sets out proposals for a tiered approach and levels of training depending on levels of contact that can be expected for people with autism. There are half a million people in England—more than 1% of the population—who we already know have autism, so there can be barely any part of the healthcare system in which any worker is unlikely to have regular contact with patients with autism and their families. So it is a core part of their job and responsibilities to be able to respond, and to make necessary adaptations in the way they behave. That is a core part of being a healthcare professional.

Dr Whitford: There are throughout society people with varying skills, disabilities or learning difficulties, so do not we need to bring that right into medical and
nursing school, and try to have a philosophy that counters what we see in society? That, frankly, is attacking the “other”. We have had so much of the politics of “other”, and attacking the “other” socially, and we need to try to get rid of that when people are at school and in medical and nursing school—not just when they have qualified.

Mike Wood: There are two important and slightly distinct points there. For mainstream education it is vital that an understanding of autism and other learning disabilities is part of personal, social, health and economic education—I do not know whether we still call it that—for precisely the reasons that the hon. Lady describes. Of course, in medical or nursing school it is vital that there is a core level of understanding of the issues for autism and other learning disabilities and of the impact they have on how people need to do their job once they have qualified and are practising and in work. That needs to be embedded from day one, but just as importantly, it must be reinforced and built on with continuing professional development.

Although there is clear evidence of inequality in many health outcomes, there is little concrete evidence yet known about how the wellness of people with autism compares with that of the general population. I hope the new framework will explicitly cover primary and community health as well as acute healthcare. Primary and community health is where much of the early interaction with patients and the wider population takes place. It could not be more important that our GPs and community healthcare staff understand the particular issues faced by patients with autism and their families, and how they should respond to them.

However, I hope the framework will go slightly further than that. I am sure that you, Dame Cheryl, might have wished to raise this issue were you not chairing the debate: the need for a GP autism register, as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, with a relatively easy and simple code so that people’s progression through primary healthcare pathways and on to an acute healthcare or a mental health setting can be tracked and we can have a better understanding of the impact of autism and learning disability on wellness and the particular challenges and experiences of people with autism.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman touched on poverty earlier. The learning disability employment gap is over 90%; if we actually want to look at the wellness of people with learning or communication difficulties, we as a society must include them, rather than parking them on the side and wasting their talents.

Mike Wood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That enormous employment gap is a tragedy in terms of not only the lost opportunities for those people directly affected, but the wasted opportunities for the many employers who could be benefiting from the skills of people with autism and other learning disabilities, and for wider society, which is losing the contributions that they can make.

Finally, I will touch quickly on the issue of mental health. Autism is not a mental illness, but we know that people with autism are much more likely to be affected by many mental illnesses, particularly anxiety-related illnesses, than the general population. We need to ensure that the new framework is properly embedded across mental healthcare as well as physical healthcare, so that our mental health services can ensure that people with autism get the proper services they need. Far too often, people with autism find not only that their condition means their mental health problems are not properly diagnosed at an early stage, but that, if diagnosed, their condition can interfere with their receiving the appropriate treatment in a way that might be expected elsewhere.

We must ensure that autism is one of the four clinical priorities right across the healthcare system and that the training our healthcare professionals receive reflects that. Only then can we start to address the healthcare inequalities that we see in this country and, hopefully, try to ensure that there are fewer repeats of the terrible stories we have heard this afternoon.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I think that, without compromising the objectivity of the Chair, I should probably have put on record at the beginning of this sitting that I currently chair the all-party parliamentary group on autism, in case people have not gathered that by this stage. Secondly, I apologise for the temperature in this room, which is below what I would consider comfortable standards. We have made inquiries and unfortunately we cannot adjust the temperature unless the room is vacated and the engineers come in to look at the equipment. I apologise for that, but, unusually, if anybody wants to put on their coats, they are welcome to. I understand that some people are feeling very cold in this environment and I can only apologise.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): 5.37 pm

Jared O’Mara (Sheffield, Hallam) (Ind): It is interesting that you mention the temperature, Dame Cheryl, because I am the first autistic MP and a symptom of my autism is that I prefer the cold and get really irritated and anxious when it gets just above body temperature. This is perfect for me—I am wearing a T-shirt.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Every cloud.

Jared O’Mara: Yes. This is one of those circumstances where Parliament has worked out in my favour, because so far my autism has not been taken into account by Parliament.
I have asked for adjustments from the Speaker’s Office so that I can comfortably speak more in the Chamber, because with things such as shouting, when everyone is heckling, the aggression and the loud noises mean I cannot cope. I have only been to Prime Minister’s questions once because of all the shouting. A Conservative MP, who I believe was the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), was not wearing a tie, and that adjustment was made in part with reference to me, because of my cerebral palsy. Much like Oliver, I have anxiety, cerebral palsy and autism—Oliver had those three—and on top of that I have depression.

There is something called comorbidity, which means that if someone has one disability, they are likely to get another. In the autism strategy of 2009 and its update for 2014, I cannot find the word comorbidity. It is a word that needs to be in the lexicon of Government and politics, the NHS and education. The same can be said for intersectionality, which is basically about the negative symbiosis between different marginalised groups and different factors. We need to look at that, and at how being disabled means that someone is more likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, including by being on benefits, unemployed or in prison.

Going off on tangents is also a quirk of my autism—I was talking about wearing a tie in Parliament and how the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East was not wearing one. One adjustment that Mr Speaker kindly made was that I should not have to wear a tie, because my cerebral palsy and the co-ordination difficulties that I have with my autism mean that I cannot do a tie. Also, wearing a clipper tie will irritate the skin around my neck. The hon. Gentleman was not wearing a tie the first time I was at Prime Minister’s questions, and several Labour MPs behind him shouted at him, “Wear a tie, you scruff.” Imagine how much that hurt me. I turned around and looked at them and shook my head, but I may as well have been invisible.

This is not only about my treatment by Parliament but by the Labour party; for those who think Parliament has not made many adjustments or treated me right, Labour is another thing entirely. I am not here to talk about me. I am here to talk about Oliver. Some people say that people with autism do not have the capacity for empathy, including Simon Baron-Cohen— the cousin of the actor who played Borat—who came up with the empathising-systemising theory. That does not resonate with me, because I can systemise and empathise, and I want to be an autistic person who gives everybody a lesson in empathy. Think about Oliver. That is not just a name, but it is good that we give him a name, because disabled people are so often treated as statistics on a balance sheet—“Can we afford to spend this money on disabled people?” The key word in “disabled people” is “people”. We are people, with names.

Let us take a moment to think about Oliver. Imagine what it would have been like for him, being given that medication and being bullied and being scared, and his anxiety going through the roof. He did not know what was happening. He looked and saw his mum and dad, who were in a state, and the doctors would not listen to them. He says, “Mum and dad, help me. Help me.” Just think about what that would be like. [ Interruption. ] No. I am autistic. Do not do that.

Think about Oliver’s mum and dad. They have lost their son. That could have been my mum and dad. A year ago, I tried to hang myself in a hotel over the road, because people were bullying me over things that I did not understand when I was 20 or 22. They made false accusations of sexism and homophobia. They did not listen to the interviews I had done. They did not listen to me talk about how I am an intersectional feminist and about equality. They did not listen to me when I said that my local pub, where I have been going all the time for 12 years, is a gay bar.

I used homophobic words, but they were the words of the time; they were on the Eminem record that I listened to at the time. It was before November 2003—[ Interruption. ]

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Please try to keep on the subject of the petition.

Jared O’Mara: I know, but it is relevant—hold on.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): You are giving a very powerful testimony, but I hope that you may try to confine your remarks to the subject of the petition in hand. That would be helpful to me in the Chair. Thank you.

Jared O’Mara: I mentioned that I go off on tangents; this is an example. Basically, there is a tendency in type 1 autistic people to mimic both the world around them and their peers, to try to fit in and not get bullied. That is what I was doing, and my bullying is an example of how people with autism are misunderstood and not listened to. It has huge parallels with what happened to Oliver and with the autistic people who my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) says have committed suicide.

I managed to stop myself—Lord knows how. It was probably because I thought of my mum and my sister and my niece and my nephew and my dad. That is probably what anchored me and brought me down off that chair—well, that and the fact that I could not climb it properly because of my cerebral palsy. That sounds like a joke, and sometimes we have to laugh at our disabilities, because it is all we have. I mastered humour and making my friends laugh, because that makes people like me. Sometimes people have to do that, because of all the bullying they get over their autism and all the misunderstandings, like those Oliver went through. Sometimes all you can do is laugh.

However, I hope that, at this juncture, people do not laugh but take a moment to reflect on what it is like for Oliver’s parents, and what it was like for Oliver at the time his life ended. I thank Oliver’s parents for bringing the petition to the Chamber, and I thank every Member here. I am being non-partisan—I am an independent Member—and I ask Members to please show the video of the debate and give copies of their speeches to their colleagues in their respective parties. I am just ruffling, as Members can tell, but by showing their colleagues the
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I rise as the Member of Parliament for Bristol North West, which contains Southmead Hospital: it was part of Oliver’s story, from which lessons need to be learned. Does the hon. Lady agree that the important point here is that we evidently have strong cross-party consensus; that we must now focus our efforts not just on debate and consultation but on achieving real change in the health service and our public services generally and right across our country; and that today’s debate gives us the impetus to do that?

Vera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have said at another occasion today that the word “Parliament” comes from the French word “parler”, which means to talk, but we are also here to take action, so we must stop talking and take action. The issue of mandatory training is something that we can fix or determine here, and I very much hope that the Government will take that on board.

The urgent need for better training on autism and learning disability and the complications of the condition could not be shown more starkly than by the failings in Oliver’s case. In February, the charity Mencap launched the “Treat me well” campaign, which is aimed at transforming how the NHS treats people with a learning disability in hospital. In particular, women with a learning disability suffer disproportionately from health inequalities. We have heard the statistics today; they die on average 29 years before women in the general population, and men with a learning disability die on average 23 years before those in the general male population. That cannot be overlooked. We have also heard these figures today, but that does not matter—it will do no harm to repeat them: a YouGov survey conducted in 2017 found that nearly one quarter of the health professionals surveyed had never attended any training on learning disability, and two thirds wanted to have more training, so what are we waiting for?

Any illness or disorder that is either misdiagnosed or diagnosed late leads to far greater problems down the line. Early intervention depends on early diagnosis, and two thirds wanted to have more training, so what are we waiting for? The Government have done very little on that. The petition was created by Paula, who is here today, and we have heard powerful testimony about her son, Oliver. I do not need to go over all the details of that, but I understand entirely how the inquest’s outcome must have been devastating the family. Clearly, something went awry. Our laws and regulations are not fully clear about the proper training that should be given, but Paula is in the petion. Her son could possibly still have been here with us. All of us here are truly sorry, and we need to do something about it.
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Cheryl. I know that other hon. Members have said this, but the work that you have done in this area, and the work of others in this Parliament, is hugely important, and its importance has never been more obvious than today. I have no direct experience other than the constituency cases that I mentioned earlier, but the level of emotion and empathy in the Chamber today is raw. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad and comorbid services and assistance, I have recently taken evidence from families who have lost loved ones abroad, albeit in different circumstances. Hearing about the circumstances of Oliver’s death, and knowing that his mother and his family are here to listen to the debate, only highlights the importance of doing something and doing it well. There can be no greater endeavour for a parliamentarian than to right a wrong by taking an experience that has been devastating or traumatic, or resulted in someone’s needless death, and trying to turn that experience into a positive—into change that will mean that others do not suffer in the same way.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) opened the debate with an excellent contribution. He took us through the details, of Oliver’s death, as the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) did, and I have to say that although I had read some of the details, I was not aware of just how devastating and difficult what happened was, how complex Oliver’s needs were and how badly he and his family were let down.

We must be very careful, because we live in a blame culture. We live in a culture in which, when things go wrong, the finger is pointed. We all know that NHS staff, in whatever part of the UK, do their very best, but there have been failings and the lessons must be learned. Oliver’s death cannot be in vain. I therefore hope that the Minister will detail what she plans to do and give us a road map forward.

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6.1 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am pleased to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Austin, which I think is a first for you and me. I pay tribute to Dame Cheryl—who was in the Chair until a few moments ago—for her work in this House on autism. I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing forward this debate. It is sometimes important that the Petitions Committee does not wait for 100,000 signatures, but is prepared to move earlier on an important topic. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for his excellent speech.

I know people were anxious about this debate, because it coincides with the statement from the Prime Minister on the October EU summit, but we have heard from a number of hon. Members. There were interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), Hartlepool (Mike Hill), Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and Bristol North West (Darren Jones), and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

We heard speeches from the hon. Members for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), Dudley South (Mike Wood) and Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara), who spoke very movingly. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). There were concerns about the clash in timing, which was really unfortunate.

Like everyone else who has spoken, I congratulate Oliver’s parents, particularly his mother, Paula McGowan, on their persistence in ensuring that Oliver’s case was brought to our attention through the e-petition, which now has 51,351 signatures, according to the latest figure I have seen. She has raised the vital issue of how we treat people with autism and learning disabilities in our health and care services.

The e-petition, which calls for the introduction of mandatory training on autism and learning disability for healthcare professionals, states:

“One in four healthcare professionals has never had training on autism or disability. This is unacceptable. Two thirds want more training, and one in three think a lack of Government leadership is contributing to the problem of avoidable deaths. The Government must ensure all healthcare professionals get mandatory training to address the huge health inequalities facing people with autism and a learning disability.”

The Government response says:

“Everyone has the right to high quality, safe health care so it is crucial that all health workers are given the skills and education to confidently deliver care that meets the needs of all their patients. This is a priority for the Government.”

If this is a priority, let us end this debate by discussing the action that we need to see.

Some 10 years ago, Mencap published the campaign report “Death by indifference” in response to the ongoing poor treatment and care in the NHS of people with a learning disability, and their premature and avoidable deaths. One of the main contentions in that report is that diagnostic overshadowing is a key barrier to people with a learning disability getting equal treatment. Diagnostic overshadowing is when doctors make dangerously faulty assumptions about people with a learning disability, revealing an overall lack of training, skills and understanding. They may wrongly believe that a presenting problem is a feature of someone’s learning disability and that not much can be done about it, which can often lead to the wrong diagnosis of a medical condition that needs treatment. That report came out 10 years ago.

In its report, the former Disability Rights Commission called for “improved staff training” explicitly to reduce the risk of diagnostic overshadowing and unequal treatment. “Death by indifference” led in 2008 to the report “Healthcare for all”, an inquiry into healthcare for people with learning disabilities. Its first recommendation was that:

“Those with responsibility for the provision and regulation of undergraduate and postgraduate clinical training, must ensure that curricula include mandatory training in learning disabilities. It should be competence-based and involve people with learning disabilities and their carers in providing training.”

That was 10 years ago, but Oliver’s case underlines the degree to which people with learning disabilities and autism still do not get the healthcare treatment that they should expect from any civilised, compassionate society.

On a slightly different note—it is all of a piece—last week, I raised in the House the case of Bethany, a young autistic woman who is being held in seclusion in a private hospital, in a locked, cell-like room and fed through a hatch. We have heard too frequently in recent months of more cases showing the mistreatment, neglect and abuse of people with learning disabilities and autism.

Oliver’s tragic case typifies cases in which people with learning disabilities have died avoidably in healthcare settings. He was a young man with a full life expectancy, who had overcome so many challenges to excel as a footballer and an athlete. He inspired and enriched everyone he met, but he was let down repeatedly, because clinicians simply did not understand the nature of his autism.

Oliver’s death was the result of a catalogue of failures and communications that were not adapted to his needs. Repeated warnings that Oliver was not to be given antipsychotic medication were ignored with fatal consequences. The parallels between Oliver’s case and those reported 10 years ago in “Death by indifference” show just how little progress has been made in giving clinicians the right training about people with learning disabilities and autism. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge mentioned, Public Health England’s 2016 survey found that only 17% of localities reported having an autism training plan across all health and care staff, while 10% reported having no plan in place.

Oliver’s case was included in the learning disabilities mortality review, which revealed scandalous health inequalities between those with autism and learning disabilities, and those without those conditions. Want of better clinical training causes those scandalous health inequalities. Men and women with autism, a learning disability or both simply should not die 20 or 30 years before those without either condition. That report was published on the morning of the local election results, when attention was inevitably directed elsewhere, which looked like an attempt to bury the findings, causing even more distress to the families of those who had died avoidably. In the words of Dr Sara Ryan, the mother of Connor Sparrowhawk, who tragically lost his life as a result of the negligence of Southern Health, the NHS trust charged with caring for him, it made it seem that the lives of their relatives “simply don’t count.”
As with earlier reports, the cases reported in the learning disabilities mortality review reinforce just how much more Government, and our health and care system, need to do to give people with autism and learning disabilities the good quality healthcare and social care that they ought to expect as a right, and to which they are entitled in law. The lack of training given to clinicians played a pivotal role in Oliver’s death and the deaths of many other people whose cases were included in that review.

As we have been reminded, almost one quarter of clinicians surveyed subsequently by Mencap revealed that they had never attended any training specifically on learning disability. More than half of clinicians would have welcomed more on-the-job training to enable them to provide better support. We have an NHS workforce that would welcome the training and a Government response that says that giving the skills and education to healthcare staff is a priority, so we now need to inject some urgency into moving forward.

Oliver’s case, the case of Connor Sparrowhawk and the cases of 1,200 people with learning disabilities who die an early death each year make that an urgent task. We need swift action, not further consultations. We need a culture change. Doctors are the decision makers and they must own the development of the training in autism and learning disability.

I hope the Minister will reflect on the debate and treat the introduction of mandatory training as an urgent priority. Can she tell us the Government’s timetable for implementing mandatory training following the close of the current consultation? What progress is being made against the recommendations of the learning disability mortality review, particularly the introduction of a named healthcare co-ordinator and the plans to help providers to make reasonable adjustments?

In the last 10 years, we have had reports, inquiries and reviews on the serious matters we have discussed in the debate. Now is the time for action to develop the training that clinicians and other staff working in health and care need. Now is the time for clinicians to own the culture change that would bring about what we all want to see—the Oliver McGowan mandatory training.

6.11 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin, and that of your predecessor, Dame Cheryl, who has done more to further the cause of people with autism than any other Member of Parliament. I put on record my thanks to all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. There have been some impressive and high-quality contributions. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for bringing the case before us and the Petitions Committee for permitting the case to be brought. I also thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara) for his testimony, although he is no longer here. I am sure we all agree that it was incredibly powerful, extremely important and exceptionally brave.

It is hard to hear the story of Oliver McGowan, which inspired the debate and the petition that triggered it. I am the mum of a teenage boy a bit younger than Oliver, so I find it heartbreaking to even think about what Paula and her family have been through. I have been in this role for nine months, and one of the great honours of the job is being able to work with some incredible, awe-inspiring people, but surely the most amazing of them are the mothers who have turned the unthinkable heartbreak and anger at the loss of a child into a crusade for change.

Dr Sara Ryan, who has already been mentioned, whose son Connor Sparrowhawk drowned in a bath while under the care of Southern Health, is the most remarkable campaigner for the way that we support adults and children with learning disabilities. Another example is the incredible Paula McGowan, Oliver’s mum, who I met last month. To say that I feel humbled by her story is a massive understatement. The way that she has been fuelled by the unspeakable tragedy of Oliver’s death to fight, to battle and to campaign to ensure that other children and parents do not have the same experience is incredibly brave and courageous. She is nothing short of an inspiration, and she inspires me to strive to tackle the inequalities that people with autism and with learning disabilities face and to do my best to prevent further avoidable tragic loss of life.

The health inequalities between people with learning disabilities and autism and the general population are well understood—virtually every hon. Member present has mentioned them. In recent years, there have been ongoing efforts to address them, but the shameful case of Winterbourne View Hospital is an example of how things have not worked.

It is a sad fact that it takes an avoidable tragedy to spur the action that we want. Since then, significant programmes of activity have been devoted to tackling the inequality that has blighted the experiences of people with learning disabilities in society—inequality is not confined to health and social care. That activity is not only about reducing the number of deaths that may have been preventable, but about improving people’s genuine experiences of care, reducing the use of restrictive interventions, increasing health and wellbeing, and ensuring that people are not hospitalised when they can be better supported in the community.

The existence of the learning disability mortality review programme—LeDeR—testifies to our commitment to reduce the number of preventable deaths among people with a learning disability. LeDeR is focused on learning disability, but has important lessons that relate to the care of autistic people. The programme, led by the Norah Fry centre at the University of Bristol, was introduced to ensure that local evidence-based action is taken to improve support for people with a learning disability. The result is that commissioners are focusing their attention on their local mortality rates and the reasons for them, and are highlighting the further national action that is needed. We must learn from those deaths quickly and translate that learning into effective remedial action that prevents any repetition.

In May, the University of Bristol published the second annual LeDeR report, which showed that 13 deaths had involved circumstances where an individual’s health had been adversely affected by entirely avoidable external factors. The report also found that, based on the examples that were reviewed, the median age of death is 23 years younger than the general population for men and 29 years younger for women. It makes for shocking and chilling...
reading. LeDeR is ongoing, so many reviews are still to come. Since then, there has been significant action to increase the number of reviews undertaken, including NHS England investing an additional £1.4 million in support of them. Hon. Members from across the House will feel, as I do, that the report is a stark message that we need to do much more to ensure that people with a learning disability receive the best quality care.

In the Government’s response to the LeDeR report, which we published on 12 September, we set out a clear action plan to make progress against each of its national recommendations. The key theme is that of facilitating better care for people with a learning disability by sharing information on their needs and by making reasonable adjustments to improve access and the responsiveness of services to meet those needs. It highlighted some actions that I am glad to say were already well under way, as well as many new actions.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister has used the word “action”. If we had been able to discuss the Government’s response to the LeDeR report, which came out the day before the conference recess, I would have said to her that there is very little action in it. The whole point of the cross-party feeling of the debate is that we want action. There are an awful lot of consultations in the response but, as I highlighted in my speech, we have had 10 years of reviews, starting with the report that came out 10 years ago. The Minister used the word “action”—can we not just get on with some?

Caroline Dinenage: We have accepted every single recommendation in the LeDeR report, and the only reason we are consulting on the recommendations about training is that we have to do that to introduce legislation and change the regulations. We need to do that properly and ensure that we take on board the experiences of people from a wide range of backgrounds so that it actually works. Training is already in the guidelines for healthcare professionals, but the hon. Lady and many other hon. Members have said that it is simply not happening. This is not about action for the sake of it or to say that we have ticked a box to make it happen, but about meaningful action that will save lives. That is why I want to get it right. I am not going to hang around; it will be done to a timescale, which I will explain more about in a moment.

An example of action is that NHS England is working with NHS Digital to add a reasonable adjustment flag to digital care records to indicate the potential adjustments that people with a learning disability may require. The flag will be available to all organisations that provide care. It will support improved communication between patients, their carers and clinicians and lead to more personalised, safer patient care and better outcomes. That capability is being developed for piloting in the NHS summary care records application this summer. We are also exploring with NHS England and NHS Digital the potential for a comparable autism flag.

We have also commissioned Oxford Brookes University to look into best practice in co-ordinating the support for people with a learning disability and a long-term condition. Hon. Members have raised the difficulties that autistic people and people with learning difficulties experience in communicating their needs to health professionals, and also highlighted the importance of hospital passports in overcoming these difficulties and ensuring that their hospital stays are safer and more comfortable. However, I know that Oliver had such a passport and it was not read, so that needs to be taken into consideration as well.

As part of our governance arrangements for the autism strategy, we have set up a task and finish group on health, care and wellbeing, which is looking at barriers to care. We will ask it to consider how we can best disseminate tools such as the hospital passport, to ensure that patients receive effective, personalised care.

Of the new actions, the one that most concerns us today is the commitment to consult on mandatory training. I believe that the steps we are taking will address the shameful inequalities that people with learning disabilities continue to experience. Everybody has the right to receive effective, compassionate and dignified care, and having a learning disability or autism should not be a bar to that.

I am absolutely committed to ensuring that all staff have the skills that they need, whether for learning disability or autism, to deliver excellent and compassionate care. We are already taking forward actions in this area, which I will set out before moving on to discuss mandatory training.

We have supported the development of the learning disability core skills education and training framework, which sets out three tiers of knowledge and skills in relation to learning disability. We are also working towards the development of an autism core skills and competency framework for health and care staff, and for staff in organisations with public-facing responsibilities.

In addition to the existing criteria for professional regulation and registration, there are also existing health and social care regulations that are designed to ensure staff have had appropriate training. However, it is clear from the tragic deaths of Oliver and the many, many like him that that is not enough; we need to go further. One of the recommendations in the LeDeR report echoes the petition in saying that there should be mandatory learning disability training for all health and care staff.

We welcome that recommendation and we have made a commitment to consult formally on it, and we will conclude the consultation by the end of March. I can also confirm that we will include autism within this consultation. My aim is not to mess around with this work, as I have already articulated; the Government’s plans will be published by the summer and regulations could be introduced by the end of 2019. A formal consultation is essential if we are going to change regulations, which is one of the routes by which we can ensure that training is absolutely mandatory.

I appreciate that several hon. Members have asked me specific questions about all sorts of logistical issues, what the content of the training should be and how it might be different for different staff groups. Of course those are all the sorts of issues that we will consult on. We need to canvass the widest possible range of opinions and we clearly are not in a position now to guess the outcome of the consultation. If it was up to me, I would want to embed this training in initial training through all the professional bodies, royal colleges and training providers, having it at all levels of health and social care, so that anybody who has any role in a health and care setting would be mandated to receive some level of
this training, obviously with different levels of training for people who work in reception and for those who are medical staff.

One of the key elements of the recommendations in the LeDeR report is that people with learning disabilities should be involved in the training. We will work with people with learning disabilities and autism, and with the groups that represent them, such as Mencap, in shaping the consultation and identifying the key questions that we have to ask. I am absolutely thrilled to say that Paula McGowan has agreed to help us with this.

The petition also refers to mandatory autism training. Of course, LeDeR looks at the deaths of people with learning disability rather than autism, but when it comes to inequalities and the patient experience there are clear parallels between the experiences of both groups and in the sort of reasonable adjustments that might be made to support both groups. It would be a missed opportunity if we did not consider in our consultation the training requirements of staff to better support autistic people as well those with learning disabilities.

Our response to LeDeR and the implementation of Building the Right Support are part of wider efforts to tackle inequality for those with learning disabilities and autism. I will briefly highlight three of these efforts in particular that have great potential. First, there is quality checkers. NHS England is developing toolkits for GP services and mental health in-patient services. These will support people with a learning disability to act as quality checkers, to examine services from their perspective and to have a dialogue with providers and commissioners on what needs to improve.

Secondly, and so importantly, there is stopping the over-medication of people with a learning disability, autism, or both, which is known as STOMP. This national programme brings together multiple organisations in the health and care field, with a common purpose to stop the over-medication with psychotropic medicines of people with a learning disability, autism or both.

Finally, commissioning guidance on autism services, and an accompanying best practice toolkit for local health and care commissioners, are due to be developed shortly and are expected to be available by next spring.

As we develop the consultation on mandatory training, it is particularly helpful to hear these issues and concerns, which hon. Members and their constituents want to see being addressed. We will reflect on, and listen to, those issues and concerns in our consultation. The consultation document will be issued in the new year, giving us sufficient time to conclude the formal consultation period by the end of March, and of course I am extremely happy to discuss with any hon. Member, or any Lord in the other place, any particular issue that they would like to see reflected and indeed tackled by the consultation at any time, either before or during the consultation.

Barbara Keeley: I asked the Minister earlier whether she could give an outline of the timetable after the consultation. When does she believe that we will see regulations to make this training mandatory?

Caroline Dinenage: I believe I have already answered that question. I said that I would like the Government plans to be published by the summer and the regulations to be amended by the end of the year.

Barbara Keeley: Can the Minister give a date, rather than a seasonal time?

Caroline Dinenage: I am afraid that I am not the scheduler, but that would be my aspiration as the Minister. Obviously, I do not have the timing for the Government, the Chambers and what have you, but that is definitely my aspiration.

It is absolutely vital that we do everything in our power to get this matter right. We owe it to Oliver and to the many, many young people with autism or learning disabilities whose lives have been tragically shortened. We owe it to Paula and Tom, and to the many parents and family members who have suffered unimaginable grief. We owe it to ourselves—a country should be judged on how it cares for its most vulnerable and on this, we must not be found wanting.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions today; both the speeches and the interventions have been of a very high quality and very thoughtful. Of course, they have also widened the debate beyond just the mandatory training issues to how people with autism and learning disabilities are treated in general. I thought the points about the employment gap in particular from the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) were very telling.

I suppose what struck me when I saw Paula’s original statement was the point where she urged staff not to always reach for the pharmaceutical approach. Important though mandatory training will be, and it is vital that we achieve it, I also think that training takes us only so far. I think that staff throughout the national health service need to have the time, the space and the confidence to treat people as individuals and hear what they are actually saying to them. That is a big transformation and a big challenge for everyone in public services, and I hope that it is something that we can try to work towards.

In conclusion, on behalf of all Members, I pay tribute once again to Oliver’s mum, Paula, for the very, very powerful campaign that she has waged. I think we can all agree that the final outcome from this process that we would like to see is the Oliver McGowan mandatory training being applied as soon as possible.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 October 2018

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON in the Chair]

HELMS and the Green Deal

9.30 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered home energy and lifestyle management systems and the Green Deal.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. Before I start, I should apologise to you and those present: this morning’s speech will be brought to you by Halls Soothers—although other sweets are available—so if I start coughing, please bear with me.

With winter approaching, the extra cost of heating a home will be a concern not only for income-poor families but for many of the Prime Minister’s “just about managing” families. Fuel poverty is still a reality for far too many in society. Unfortunately, many of those households live in energy-inefficient homes. That fact, combined with stagnant incomes and the impact of the Government’s austerity measures, leaves some households vulnerable to increasingly unaffordable energy bills.

To compound that, hundreds of my constituents now have unaffordable and hugely inflated bills thanks to the UK Government’s bungled green deal scheme. The green deal was a flagship scheme intended to give homeowners access to cheap loans to modify and improve home energy efficiency. The loans were to be paid back through monthly energy bills, which were to be cheaper due to the green investment made in people’s homes. That credit, however, was often sold as grant funding to confuse consumers.

The fundamental rule, or “golden rule” as it is known, was and is that the savings on bills should always be equal to or greater than the cost of the work. The idea was that consumers would be able to receive energy improvements in effect for free, reducing energy consumption and breaking free from spiralling energy bills. Not only would the house save money and have a lower carbon footprint but, it was hoped, such schemes would reduce carbon production throughout the country, helping to achieve the Government’s carbon reduction targets.

A scheme that empowers households to get out of fuel poverty and have warmer homes is always welcome, but for far too many this scheme failed, and failed utterly. The Government’s ambitious aims looked good on paper, but they fell well short and, as the result of a weak and ill-conceived framework, families were left far worse off. Rather than “pay as you save”, constituents were left paying more and saving nothing or, in far too many cases, actually footing the bill for fraud. Investment in energy savings should be a national priority, and I think that everyone across the House would agree that we need to meet fuel poverty targets and reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but elements of the scheme were so badly designed and involved such ineffective regulation that for many it became a nightmare.

I should point out, before the Minister does in her summing up, that plenty of businesses and providers did not abuse the system, with the result that many consumers benefited from the scheme, as was originally envisaged. The green deal, however, was allowed to be abused by criminals who preyed on and exploited households, many of them vulnerable. Ultimately, regardless of one’s politics or trust in any Government, no one thinks they are about to be scammed when a Government logo is on the paperwork. We will come back to the Government, who were in effect the enablers of this great fraud, but the actual fraudsters themselves were Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems, or HELMS.

The behaviour of Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd was inexcusable. The use of classic dodgy salesman tactics—overstaying in customers’ homes to intimidate them into a sale, blatant falsifying of figures, misleading documentation, fraudulent marking of signatures, insistence on inappropriate works and outright lying to elderly vulnerable individuals—has pushed victims into deeper fuel poverty and debt, with no access to a quick and effective remedy. In the majority of cases that I have seen, individuals were sold solar panels regardless of need or suitability. Once again misled on finance, those individuals unknowingly sold their ownership of the solar panel feed-in tariff to offset the up-front cost of works. Ultimately, that meant that households had solar panels on their roof, were possibly still liable for maintenance and servicing, and yet received no financial benefit.

More unbelievably, the managing director of the now liquidated company HELMS, Robert Skillen, not only is a director of PV Solar Investments Ltd—the separate company set up to receive HELMS’s customers’ feed-in tariffs that, shamefully, is still trading and is in receipt of mis-sold victims’ feed-in tariffs—and the man with the brassiest of brass necks, but is now looking to profit from “mis-sold energy claims” through a company called True Solar Savings, despite it not being authorised by the Claims Management Regulator. He has fleeced us once, but now wants to assist us in getting redress from his own company’s mis-selling. The man has zero shame, and his outrageous lack of recognition of his culpability is astounding.

Given Robert Skillen’s central role as managing director of HELMS, therefore, I strongly advise against any business interactions with that man or his companies. Robert Skillen and HELMS, however, were enabled by the UK Government, but my constituents and many others throughout the country are now paying the price for the Government’s casual short-sightedness.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): My constituency, like others, has been affected. One-hundred and sixty-nine of my constituents have been affected, and what was striking about the public meetings that we held was the proportion of elderly people in their 70s and 80s—one with dementia, another with almost total blindness—who were tricked into this. It was not, on any level, the selling of solar panels; it was fraud.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon.

Friend. We are not in a competition, but although the issue affected 169 people in her constituency, in mine 293 households received HELMS panels, out of more
than 3,000 in Scotland. Like her, I held my first public meeting on the issue earlier this month. As we know, attendance at such meetings can be a bit of a hit-and-miss affair, but although the subject was rather niche, targeting households with solar panels, about 120 people were in attendance. The meeting was full of individuals with similar stories of being taken advantage of by outrageous mis-selling, pressured into agreeing to inappropriately costed works or told blatant lies for a quick sale.

Two of my constituents, Mr and Mrs Murray, were particularly affected. A HELMS salesman knocked on their door in Linwood—a part of my constituency particularly affected by the mis-selling—and stated that it was to have funding available to invest in homes and energy. He had pressured the Murrays by insisting that the funding was time-limited and finite. They were told that they should have loft insulation, exterior wall insulation and solar panel works. He mentioned no tie between finance and their energy bills, and nothing about a debt tied to their property until 2039 at £1.47 a day.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): As my hon. Friend knows, last year I set up the all-party parliamentary group on green deal mis-selling, which I chair. We have been inundated by problems of that kind. The distinct issue in Scotland, with cladding work in particular, is the requirement for building warrants, which HELMS did not apply for and which cannot be applied for retrospectively. That leaves householders unable to sell or insure their homes. Does he agree that the Government should do more to support people in that position?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, the chair of the HELMS all-party group here at Westminster. I shall come to this, but the building warrants issue is complex. In fact, I apologise in advance for making a longer speech than I am accustomed to, because of so many such complexities, building warrants being just one of them.

Back to Mr and Mrs Murray. The HELMS salesman tied them into an additional finance agreement with a personal finance company for a debt repayment of more than £9,000 to meet the expense of the solar panel installation. My constituents acknowledge that they were aware of that finance, but were told by the salesman that they would receive feed-in tariff payments quarterly to offset that cost, as well as having the benefit of lowered energy consumption and billing. However, such was the unfathomable incompetence and mis-selling of HELMS that when the Murrays applied for their feed-in tariff payments, they were missing essential documentation for the process. They pleaded with HELMS, which remained unco-operative and, as we all know, then went into liquidation, leaving my constituents helpless.

It gets worse. In January 2016, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, as was, introduced a statutory instrument requiring all existing renewable energy installations with certification issued before 15 January 2016 to submit their feed-in tariff application by 31 March 2016 or be unable to claim any feed-in tariffs or export payments. One UK Government to protect my constituents from the unscrupulous criminal behaviour of HELMS, despite accrediting it as an approved provider, but went on to implement procedures that would prevent my constituents from ever receiving payment for the solar panels that they pay £88 a month for. Mr and Mrs Murray have gone from paying £90 a month for energy to paying £220 a month, all under a Government incentive.

Many people did not know either that a 25-year debt would be tied to their house, potentially making it difficult to sell. An even bigger impediment to selling houses is that many households—possibly the vast majority—have no building warrant for the insulation that was installed on the exterior of their property. They were not informed of the need to apply for a warrant, and now not only might struggle to get one but may have to cough up the statutory uplift of 300% extra for a late application.

To compound that, in some cases when homes generate on-site renewable electricity via generating equipment such as solar panels, their import supply meter is incompatible with and affected by that on-site generation, sometimes resulting in inaccurate meter readings and billing issues. The current metering system and equipment was designed and configured to record meter electricity flows from the distribution network to consumer premises, but on-site generation has in some cases resulted in metering difficulties at premises where it is used, which are increasing in number.

Two things can happen. First, the import supply meter can run backwards. Since the ‘80s, to prevent tampering, meters have been fitted with backstops so they cannot run in the wrong direction. Where on-site generators are connected at sites with meters that do not have backstops, exporting electricity causes the meter to run backwards. As a result, the consumer’s import meter readings are reduced by the amount of electricity they export. When that is discovered, the supplier may recalculate the consumer’s bill for the period for which the meter operated incorrectly and charge the consumer for the shortfall. In most cases, on-site generation exports are unmetered and the supplier needs to use estimates to calculate the bill.

In other cases, the meter treats all electricity in the same way. Some digital meters are configured in a way that results in them adding exported electricity to the imported electricity meter reading, which can result in the consumer paying for both imported and exported electricity. Again, once that situation is identified, historical bills need to be estimated.

Two other constituents of mine, Mr and Mrs Scott, had a HELMS salesman at their door five times. On the fifth occasion, Mrs Scott agreed to the works. She did so only after researching the Government’s accreditation and backing of HELMS. The family have gone from paying around £70 a month in energy bills to paying between £170 and £265 a month. The reason for that increase and variation in expenditure is that, on top of the green deal finance charges, the meter and the panels are incompatible. As a result, the family’s supply meter runs backwards and my constituents pay estimated bills from their supplier. They have fought for years to have that corrected. Only now, with prompting and reference to Ofgem guidance, has their supplier agreed to replace their supply meter with a compatible one.

That shows how ill-equipped HELMS was. Its lack of knowledge—or more likely, if we are honest, its lack of care—about panel and meter compatibility was outrageous. That should never have been an issue, and my constituents should never have seen their energy bills triple.
Members are no doubt beginning to see just how complex this issue is. My constituents and many other people across the UK have been through years of agony in seeking redress. HELMS failed to correct complaints. Constituents who took their cases to the green deal ombudsman were told they could no longer use that as a route to redress because HELMS no longer participated in the ombudsman scheme. Cases sat with the Financial Ombudsman Service for well over a year with no action. HELMS was liquidated and redress, such as it was, was unobtainable.

This was a UK Government incentive, backed and promoted as such. HELMS was accredited, and indeed promoted, under the Government banner, allowing it to enter homes and sell under a false umbrella of trust. Many of the families I have dealt with were sold on the phrase, “Government backed”. In fact, that was what persuaded many of them to listen to the dodgy sales patter in the first place. I have subsequently found that during that time, when someone searched online for a list of Government-accredited providers, HELMS was often top of the list.

How can the Government sit idle while households are left saddled with the hardships caused by HELMS? The very reason why work was agreed to was the shiny stamp of approval from the UK Government. What good is Government accreditation if it is worthless when issues and violations occur?

Who takes responsibility? HELMS and Robert Skilling have thus far escaped ultimate accountability. Despite being fined £200,000 by the Information Commissioner’s Office, they paid a mere £10,000 before the liquidation of HELMS. That highlights why the ICO has called on the Government to allow it to issue penalties of up to £500,000 to the company directors responsible.

Thus far, the Government have washed their hands of any responsibility for this mess. Instead, they hope the Green Deal Finance Company, which purchased the green deal loan book from them, will deal with it. Although GDFC was aware of some irregularities, it was not informed of the scale of the mis-selling and fraud that HELMS undertook. Given the delays with seeking redress through the ombudsman, GDFC offered to take over the case load directly to try to speed up the process. Although that has helped, the process is still too slow. GDFC has admitted that it was ill-equipped and understaffed to deal with the scale of the issue. It has apologised for the delay and vowed to speed up the process.

Colleagues may have a different take and may have casework to prove otherwise, but I have met GDFC three times—I was particularly pleased that it attended my public meeting in Linwood—and my impression is that it is diligently, if slowly, working through the various claims and, in the majority of cases, making offers to reduce loans or cancel them altogether. Of course mistakes will be made—my office has asked GDFC to reassess particular decisions, and it will continue to ask if necessary—but thus far, in my view, GDFC has worked in good faith.

Dr Whitford: Is not part of this issue that people of that age should never have been sold 25-year finance for solar panels that may last only 15 years or so? The offer to my constituents seems to have been only to reduce what they owe, not to clear it. They are still being told, “We’ll let you off £4,000, but you still owe us £6,000 for panels that aren’t working.”

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. The age at which some people entered 25-year agreements is shameful. That should never have been allowed. It was obviously known that that debt would ultimately just be tied to the house rather than to the individuals concerned. The reductions in payments ultimately go back to the Government’s golden rule of trying to put the consumer in no worse a position than they were previously. In my mind, that is not good enough. That is why the Government should step in rather than allowing the Green Deal Finance Company to deal with the issue itself.

An independent source calculated that the compensation process, which GDFC had no obligation to instigate, may cost the company upwards of £20 million. For its part, GDFC thinks that there remains merit in the green deal scheme. Everyone agrees with the idea, albeit with some regulatory tweaks and tightening up, but we have issues with how it was implemented and regulated.

GDFC itself has identified some of the issues that should be addressed. First, it is unclear whether a consumer with a complaint about a green deal provider should take it to the Financial Ombudsman Service, the green deal ombudsman or Ofgem. There is a risk that each regulator relies on the activities of the others, and that firms that pose a risk to consumers are not properly monitored or controlled.

Furthermore—this is crucial in the vast majority of HELMS cases—despite the regulation built into the scheme through dual regulation by the Green Deal Oversight and Registration Body and the Financial Conduct Authority, there is a complete absence of regulation of the assignment of feed-in tariff payments, which are not regulated by either of those bodies. That has caused severe consumer detriment. The feed-in tariff assignment was in many cases grossly undervalued. GDFC examined HELMS customer documentation and discovered that there was no calculation of the value paid for the feed-in tariff. HELMS simply took the difference between the green deal loan value and the cost of the solar panel installation. That meant it was incentivised to maximise green deal advice report savings by manipulating the energy performance certificate assessment, thereby maximising the value of the green deal loan and minimising the amount paid for the feed-in tariff. The effect was to maximise the net income of PVSI, HELMS’s sister company.

There is no statutory mechanism for the feed-in tariff to be reassigned in the case of mis-selling. There is no regulation of the company that receives the feed-in tariff. The contract that some customers signed and some discovered they had not signed allows the customer to buy back the rights to the feed-in tariff from PVSI, but only at the original purchase price, notwithstanding how far through the feed-in tariff income stream that takes place. GDFC believes that the feed-in tariff contracts with PVSI should be set aside. I agree, and I am sure that hon. Members do too.

As I have said, when people see any kind of Government logo on a document, the last thing they expect is to be scammed. That is why the UK Government must do more to help people in that position. My colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group in Westminster and the cross-party group in Holyrood will not allow the UK Government to wash their hands of this responsibility.

I have a number of questions for the Minister, who I know is standing in for the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes.
[Gavin Newlands]

(Claire Perry), so I hope that she will commit to respond in writing to questions that she is unable to answer today. The right hon. Member for Devizes said that she would meet me; will the Minister confirm that she is willing to meet me, the Green Deal Finance Company and trading standards in the same meeting?

Many have already paid off their loans for a number of reasons: peace of mind, concerns about carrying extra debt or because they had difficulties selling their property. They are still potential victims of fraud, but without an active loan, they cannot gain redress from the Green Deal Finance Company. What happens to them? How do they get their money back?

What was the Green Deal Finance Company advised about HELMS and mis-selling more generally when it was sold the loan book? Why was the feed-in tariff element not regulated? Would the Minister consider legislation to regulate it? Will the Government take steps to ensure that the ombudsman is appropriately resourced and has more powers to deal with rogue providers? Will the Minister meet the power companies to ensure that the metering problems are fixed as a matter of urgency and that no house will be left worse off or in debt as a result of inadequate metering? Crucially, will she commit, at the very least, to considering a compensation fund for those affected?

Thus far there has been nothing short of an abdication of duty by the Government. They have an obligation to do something to help the thousands of households that have been affected by this fraudulent behaviour. The scandalous mis-selling of panels was carried out by HELMS but enabled by the UK Government under their banner. Therefore, it is the Government’s responsibility to fix this mess and ensure that our constituents are adequately compensated in a timely fashion. A fund to resource and has more powers to deal with rogue providers? Will the Minister meet the power companies to ensure that the metering problems are fixed as a matter of urgency and that no house will be left worse off or in debt as a result of inadequate metering? Crucially, will she commit, at the very least, to considering a compensation fund for those affected?

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9.53 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) on securing the debate and on making the case so succinctly on behalf of his constituents. I am sure that colleagues are well aware that the green deal was not extended to Northern Ireland, but tackling fuel poverty and making homes more energy efficient remains a priority for us. I will speak about a number of similar schemes and options available in Northern Ireland. I support the hon. Gentleman and I am sure that other hon. Members will back him up.

I support redress for all the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and others who have been financially disadvantaged to a considerable extent. When reading up on the topic, I was truly shocked to read about the questionable business practices that many HELMS employees seemed to adopt; we have heard about some already and we will hear more. It is no wonder that so many Members are here today talking about the negative impact on their constituents. Many were left out of pocket and some have struggled to sell their homes, which the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Over the past few years, there has been an increase in fraud, especially in relation to solar panels. In 2017, directors of a company were jailed, and recently a six-member gang committed a £17 million fraud in a solar panel scam. The full rigour of the law must be brought to bear on the company directors responsible.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is listening intently to what is being said and I look forward to her response. I know this matter is not ultimately her responsibility and she is filling in; nevertheless, I hope she is able to respond to my hon. Friend’s intervention.

When the company went into liquidation, many customers found themselves at a total loss, unable to take up their case with either the ombudsman or the company. The fact that the green deal was backed by Government undoubtedly gave the scheme credibility. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said that one of his constituents phoned to check the scheme and found that it was Government-backed, so thought that it must be all right, but it was not. Coupled with the idea of saving money and being green, that resulted in many customers signing agreements that they did not necessarily understand, on the premise that their bills would not increase. It was disappointing for many that that did not turn out to be the case.

Members have given evidence that these operators of the scheme took advantage of their constituents. That said, Members must ensure that we do not undermine public trust in these types of scheme, given the potential benefits they can deliver. For example, in Northern Ireland, we have worked hard to tackle fuel poverty, and earlier this year, fuel poverty figures for the Province fell to 22%—a welcome drop from 42%. That indicates what we are doing back home, even with a stuttering Assembly.

Dr Whitford: I understand that the Government hope to do a future green deal project. Will that not be completely undermined if this issue is not resolved?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Government have a great responsibility to address the issue for the sake of the credibility of any future schemes and so that participants in them will not worry about the future.

It is important to recognise that price fluctuations in home heating oil played a role in the fuel poverty figures I just gave. The reduction is welcome news, but we should not rest on our laurels: 22% of people considered fuel poor is still 22% too many.

A scheme that has proved to be extremely successful is the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme. It has a particular focus on tackling fuel poverty, with 80% of funding ring-fenced for vulnerable and low-income families. The NISEP provides help to install energy-saving measures in homes, including energy-efficient boilers, heating controls, loft insulation and cavity wall insulation. With funding coming from a levy paid by all electricity customers, the scheme is delivered by energy companies
and managed by the Utility Regulator. We have a system in place that has managed the programme well and delivered.

In 2017–18, five energy companies provided schemes, each of which had different eligibility criteria and incentives and/or grants to help people to make their homes more energy efficient and perhaps reduce their overall energy bills. As I mentioned, the focus is on those at risk of fuel poverty—for example, many of the schemes work directly with housing associations, which identify eligible tenants. The sheer variety of schemes means that people can make informed decisions about which scheme would best suit them and address their specific needs.

The NISEP provides some £7.9 million towards energy efficiency interventions, which include insulation and heating upgrades. It has proved so successful that it has been extended again until March 2019. The programme is working. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North referred to a different scheme. I only wish that scheme were the same as then we would not have needed this debate. We have accountability whereas, as he said and as we want to illustrate, there is no accountability in that scheme.

Angela Crawley: The hon. Gentleman is speaking to specific issues of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. To come back to the mis-selling of the green deal, does he agree that people were conned into buying mis-sold products on the basis that there were UK Government logos on the paperwork, and UK Government approval on the basis that there were UK Government logos on the paperwork, and UK Government approval. We agree that people were conned into buying mis-sold products on the basis that there were UK Government approval. We agree that people were conned into buying mis-sold products on the basis that there were UK Government logos on the paperwork, and UK Government approval on the basis that there were UK Government logos on the paperwork, and UK Government approval on the basis that there were UK Government logos on the paperwork, and UK Government approval. Does he agree that the scheme was the same as then we would not have needed this debate. We have accountability whereas, as he said and as we want to illustrate, there is no accountability in that scheme.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. With great respect to the Minister and the Government, I expect the Government to respond positively to the request being made on behalf of the constituents who have been disadvantaged and mis-sold products and who, as a consequence, are poorer today than they thought they would be. I cannot understand how someone who was paying an electricity bill of £80 a month can suddenly be paying £170 or £240 a month, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North described. How can that be cheaper? How can it be legal? How can that be allowed to happen? That must be taken on board.

Across the United Kingdom, we all recognise the importance of becoming greener and the need to have a diverse and sustainable energy mix, which is why it is important to look at new technologies as well as to harness those that are already tried and tested. The Northern Ireland renewables obligation, like its equivalent in Great Britain, requires suppliers to source an increasing proportion of the electricity they supply from renewable sources. Colleagues might be surprised that, despite the often wet and windy climate in Strangford—in fact, my constituency has among the lowest rainfall in Northern Ireland; we sometimes wonder if that is true, but the statistics prove it—one of the most promising sources of renewable energy that people are turning to is solar. This might be controversial given the topic of the debate, but it really does work when done well.

There is a number of large farms in Strangford, and many of them have installed solar panels—in fact, one farm in my constituency has 10 acres of solar panels. That is an example of what can happen when green energy is done right, and that is what we want. With renewables obligation certificates guaranteeing payment for every unit of electricity generated, it is not surprising that so many are investing in solar panels. Not only can people save money on electricity bills, but they help to make Northern Ireland, and the whole United Kingdom, a greener place for the next generation, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.

What has happened with HELMS has probably put a lot of constituents off installing solar panels and, more broadly, installing renewable energy measures, but as we try to tackle climate change and battle to keep the lights on, it is important that we look closely at green energy measures, from electric cars and smart homes to making simple energy-efficiency changes to our homes. Not everyone will benefit from solar panels—people who do not generate enough electricity are unlikely to reap benefits and will end up paying more. As has been illustrated today, that was the case for many hon. Members’ constituents, and HELMS was at fault. The Minister, the Department and the Government must respond. However, it is so important that we do all we can both to help people out of fuel poverty and to support the use of renewables where possible and appropriate.

10.3 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) on securing the debate and making a powerful speech to introduce the complex but dramatic and distressing situation of green deal mis-selling and the impact of HELMS in particular.

I was elected last year by a community that I have grown up and lived in my whole life. Balornock is probably similar in many ways to Linwood in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency: it was an overspill estate created after the second world war, built at a time of great optimism in the Glasgow city region, where people were moving out of overcrowded slum tenements in the inner city and into what they saw as new build housing, with indoor toilets and front and back gardens. The community was largely born of the baby boomer generation, who moved in and have lived there their whole lives. Many benefited, as they saw it, from buying their council houses in the 1980s and 1990s, and, as they reached retirement, they wanted to make improvements to their houses.

The community was built out of great optimism and aspiration for the future. Five years ago, the green deal was launched to great fanfare by the Tory Government, with the promise of a win-win situation for homeowners: lower energy bills and the chance to do their bit for the environment. It seemed like a great idea. Those who sought to exploit that scheme cynically homed in and targeted communities, particular those with a large population of baby boomers in self-contained housing units—not flatted accommodation—with back and front gardens. If the scheme sounded too good to be true, that was because for some in those communities it turned out to be exactly that.

Dozens of my constituents in Glasgow signed up to install green deal-financed improvements to their homes, such as solar panels and insulated cladding, but that has proven to be one of the worst decisions they have ever made. Instead of realising the Government’s vision of a
flagship programme to reduce fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency, the complete failure to regulate the scheme properly has allowed it to be ruthlessly exploited by gangsters and other rogue traders, who have systematically preyed on trusting people who thought that, as the scheme was approved and accredited by the Government, they could trust its credentials and sign up.

In 2015 Christine McBain, one of my constituents, handed over her life’s savings to a Cambuslang-based green deal provider called Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—otherwise known as HELMS—to put external wall insulation on her Swedish timber-framed house in Balornock. Those houses are a common feature of Balornock, because after the second world war the overspill in Glasgow was so problematic that timber kit houses were imported from Scandinavia, such was the pressure on housing. More than half a century later, those houses are not the most energy-efficient, so this offer seemed like a plausible way for those homeowners to make them better. As I have said, it turned out to be the worst decision they ever made.

Another constituent, 86-year-old Mary, handed over lifetime’s savings and has been left with £17,000 of debt after being duped by HELMS with no sign of any redress. It is the most appalling experience as an MP to see people who are meant to be enjoying their retirement, and feeling safe in their life’s work and savings, but who have been stripped of any sense of security and are in absolute distress about what they are having to deal with. If this is not dealt with urgently, sadly they will have to deal with it for the remainder of their lives. That is a shameful indictment on the Government’s failure to regulate their policy.

Christine and Mary are among many local residents in my constituency who have been left totally in limbo by HELMS. The company carried out similar works on more than 160 properties in my constituency without obtaining the necessary building warrants, cynically preying on local residents with promises of free solar panels and cavity wall insulation that would save them thousands of pounds. Normally such a matter would be easily remedied with a retrospective application for a building warrant from Glasgow City Council. However, because building standards were not adhered to by HELMS, no backdated planning permission can be granted without costly surveys. In addition, the statutory fee for a building warrant will be tripled where works have already been completed. Residents simply do not have the financial resources to fund that, and in the absence of building warrants the houses are now uninsurable and unsellable. Residents—many in the latter years of their lives—feel effectively imprisoned in their own homes. That is shameful.

I am currently seeking agreement from Glasgow City Council to waive the multiplier fee for the retrospective warrant and to cover the cost of the surveys needed for the building works. Will the Minister write to Glasgow City Council’s chief executive and offer a dialogue. I would be receptive to the hon. Lady’s proposal of the Government offering to finance those costs as a way of breaking the impasse and getting the problem dealt with. The problem requires a whole-Government approach from city level, Scotland level and UK level. That would be the most proactive way to deal with it. Ultimately, however, responsibility lies with the Department that introduced the scheme, and it should show some moral and financial leadership.

Earlier this year I met representatives of the Green Deal Finance Company to raise my constituents’ concerns. In the last year alone the GDFC has upheld 169 complaints against HELMS, compared with 14 complaints against all other contractors upheld since 2013. Clearly, one contractor is a massive outlier in those figures. Some 154 cases against HELMS remain under consideration by the GDFC. However, the piecemeal approach to handling complaints has put the onus on the victims. The sheer number of complaints upheld against HELMS suggests that there was a systemic failure of regulation by the Government and that a proactive approach is now needed, to tackle that huge failure in the green deal scheme. It was the responsibility of the Minister and the GDFC to lead in the matter; it cannot be the responsibility of residents who are already distressed, disoriented and at their wits’ end in trying to deal with it. They cannot be put under further stress from the huge effort of having to right the wrong.

Angela Crawley: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware, from speaking to his constituents, that people who chose to pay over several years through their electricity bills are not able to withhold payment, which is a common and acceptable consumer rights practice, if they believe that there was mis-selling. If the power company does not receive the funds, those people accrue debt. They cannot prevent the green deal payment from being made through their energy bills, which means they accrue more debt in the process.

Mr Sweeney: I completely agree. One of the most insidious aspects of the green deal scheme is that it locks people into a structural system. The loan is tied to the house, so the property imprisons the resident. That is the most appalling aspect of the way things have been manipulated by HELMS and other nefarious practitioners of the scheme.

HELMS made more than 6 million nuisance sales calls and, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, was fined £200,000 by the Information Commissioner’s Office. The Department of Energy and Climate Change also fined the firm another £10,500, but conveniently the company was put into liquidation by its owners, who walked away after paying just £10,000 of the fines owed. The company was owned by the multi-millionaire Robert Skillen, who continues to live a highly privileged lifestyle at the expense of the thousands of people who ripped off—including my constituents—leaving a trail of misery and chaos in his wake. He fled abroad and continues to profit from his fraudulent business practices. If he had any honour he would return to the UK and face the accusations against him. Indeed, he should face prosecution for fraud.
Gavin Newlands: I just want to make Members aware that Mr Skillen has returned to the country—on a number of occasions, I think. Once he turned up at the Green Deal Finance Company to ask for the details of the customers who have contacted it, so that he could contact them directly, such is the shamelessness of the man.

Mr Sweeney: It is appalling to realise that this chap has such a shameless attitude that he does not accept the harm he has caused to thousands of people, who cannot sleep at night. I hope that he will realise the impact he has had on them. However, it is time the Minister and the GDFC took formal steps to censure and effectively blacklist the guy, to stop him continuing to exploit vulnerable people.

As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) mentioned, dozens of other homeowners in Glasgow North East are still literally paying the price of the green deal’s failure, through the finance deals that they were conned into to get the work done. A home is somewhere that we should all be able to consider a sanctuary and place of safety. However, many are so depressed by the green deal trap that they can no longer bear to live in their own homes, which are the very source of their torment.

Most people would consider a Government-backed scheme such as the green deal to carry a copper-bottomed guarantee, but for many of my constituents the feeling is one of total betrayal by the authorities they trusted. The Tory Government created the environment in which rogue traders could pull a fast one. The Government and the Green Deal Finance Company must now do everything they can to find a remedy for those who have been adversely affected. They must contact all 4,226 HELMS loan recipients, to make them aware of what they can do to find redress if they experience financial detriment because of the scheme. They must also consider a compensation scheme for those affected by mis-selling by HELMS.

That is why after I was elected I joined the all-party parliamentary group on green deal mis-selling, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Rurherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and why I presented a Bill for the Green Deal Finance Company to ask for the details of the customers who have contacted it, so that he could contact them directly, such is the shamelessness of the man.

There is no denying that the scheme was Government-backed, but it turns out that the wider regulatory provisions failed to ensure that the deal was fit for purpose. What is required is for the UK Government to put in place a compensation scheme for all the consumers who have been left out of pocket—and there are many. We now have a situation where some homeowners who were taken in by the scheme have been left unable to sell their homes. They are not making the savings that they were told they would. It has all come to nothing. Some have been left with higher bills than they had before. The work carried out has often been substandard. Building warrants for wall cladding have not been obtained, so the consumers affected have had to pay for retrospective warrants at 300% of the cost of a normal building warrant, or have had to pay to have corrective works done, because building standards will not issue a warrant if they deem the work not to have been done properly. We have constituents who are not on a feed-in tariff because they were not registered prior to March 2016. Far too many people now face the prospect of monthly repayments for finance deals with extensive payback periods in excess of 20 years. How can that possibly be acceptable?

I am pleased that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth assured me in a debate on 10 October that she would ask her officials to look at the loan arrangements. She pointed out:

“The green deal...was designed to unlock the issue of persuading people to improve the energy efficiency measures of their homes. Currently, all contracts are covered by existing consumer protection, but as a second action point I undertake to go away and review this specific company and write to her with the state of progress on those conversations.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 110WH.]

I await that letter with eager anticipation. I am sure that the Minister who is responding today can see that, far from unlocking the issue of persuading people to improve the energy efficiency measures of their homes”, the scandal has undoubtedly set that cause back considerably, which is in no one’s interest. However, the Government could do much to mitigate the distrust that has been sown, the alarm that has been caused and the financial loss that those caught up in the scandal feel.

We have heard that the issue is complex, but in another sense it is very simple: the UK Government-backed scheme has led to ordinary consumers facing huge difficulties, and it is incumbent on the UK Government—there is a moral imperative—to put it right. The debacle shows that the UK Government’s system of regulation is simply not fit for purpose. Consumers did not have the protection under the law that they were entitled to expect. That needs to be addressed. Those consumers who inadvertently and unwittingly signed over their feed-in tariffs must have them returned. Today, those who have suffered in the HELMS fiasco simply want to know whether the Government are going to step up, or whether they are going to leave those who trusted the Government-backed scheme floundering in debt, hardship and despair. I urge the Minister to do the right thing and help the people who have been let down, misled and swindled by the scheme.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I should like to leave a couple of minutes at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion.

10.19 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) on securing this important debate. He made the case against HELMS excellently—the mis-selling of loans, the outright fraud, the fact that it was deemed to be a Government-backed scheme, the targeting of the vulnerable, the transfer of feed-in tariffs, and the personal finance arrangements that effectively forced people to commission other works. Some people took out loans for works that the Scottish Government would have paid for directly because they invest in energy efficiency measures.

My hon. Friend mentioned that building warrants were not applied for and people were not told that they needed them; now, statutory fees are added if people apply for a building warrant retrospectively. We heard about incorrect metering, and the fact that HELMS was able to go into liquidation and walk away, paying just £10,000 out of a record £200,000 fine for cold calling. We heard about the Government’s total inaction and inadequate governance, and about the Government’s attitude, which when combined with the actions of HELMS, has created fuel-poor households rather than helping people with their fuel bills. My hon. Friend’s comments were echoed by other speakers. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke about people being imprisoned or trapped in their homes, which is a travesty. He said that he asked Glasgow City Council to waive the statutory late fees for building warrants, and I put the same request to my local authority. The problem is that these are statutory fees—in law, they cannot be waived. That puts the ball firmly in the corner of the UK Government, who should pay those fees.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a disgrace that people are being locked into these deals. Older adults and vulnerable individuals were, I believe, deliberately mis-sold these products. In some cases in my constituency, which thankfully have now been dealt with, it meant that elderly individuals could not move from their homes to sheltered accommodation or nursing homes when they needed care.

Alan Brown: It is a shocking indictment and really disgraceful that people are trapped and cannot get into houses that are fit for purpose.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) correctly highlighted the need for compensation, the issue of people who are unable to sell their homes, and the March 2016 feed-in tariff deadline that means that people are missing out on the tariffs they expected. It was good to hear a concession from the Minister about reviewing consumer regulation, and it will be interesting to see how that progresses. My hon. Friend issued a further challenge to the Government, and we all want to see action and intervention on this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North highlighted issues that are familiar to SNP Members but that the UK Government have so far chosen to ignore, despite numerous written parliamentary questions and letters from MSPs and MPs, including me. Surely today the Minister will confirm that the UK Government will take action and listen to our calls for a compensation fund for those affected.

Let me give some headline statistics: 162 households in my constituency have green deal finance with HELMS, and of those 142 have photovoltaic installations. Some 3,054 households in Scotland have HELMS green deal finance for PVs, and there are more than 4,000 across the UK. Other Members have mentioned the duration of loans: 93% of those loans in Scotland, including for 97% of my affected constituents, are in the range of 20 to 25 years. Think of that: a supposedly spend-to-save measure is being paid back over 20 or 25 years. No private company would take out such a loan to make projected minor annual savings because the risk is too great. We already know about the dodgy installations and wiring, but there is no way that those PV cells have a lifespan of 20 to 25 years. The additional ongoing maintenance required will offset any projected savings that people were led to believe they would get. Imagine having an asset that will not last for the life of the loan—it is criminal. Anyone aged 40 or over who has taken out a loan will still be paying it back when they reach state retirement age and beyond. That would be bad enough under normal loan ethics, but as we have heard, many people who took out those loans were duped by salesmen who said that savings would pay for a Government-backed scheme. What does the Minister say to the people who have been cruelly conned and left with long-term loans?

Angela Crawley: One couple who approached me had specifically been told that installing solar panels would help them make money on the sale of their home, but instead they have been paying double and triple the amount for their electricity. Does my hon. Friend agree that those who have been hardest hit are people in middle to low-income homes?

Alan Brown: I completely agree: this scheme is creating fuel-poor households, which is why Government intervention is needed.

How did this come about? For me, the situation results from a combination of a few factors. It was originally a Liberal Democrat policy that clearly had not been correctly thought through, and there was a Tory partner in the coalition Government who maintained a “hands off—market forces will prevail” ideology, which prevented direct Government intervention. There was always the desire not to get directly involved. Some unscrupulous businessmen saw a fantastic opportunity to make money at the expense of the vulnerable. The impact of events has since been compounded by successive Tory Governments who have refused to take a lead as the mis-selling scandal unravels.

I find it incomprehensible that the UK Government have so far not seen fit to have a proper investigation into this matter and they are forcing victims to take out individual claims. That adds to the stress of the situation, and coupled with the non-disclosure agreement that is associated with any settlement offered from the Green Deal Finance Company, it is apparent that the initial
approach is to minimise any refunds to those who deserve them. It is a classic “divide and conquer” approach, rather than an attempt to do the right thing.

When I read the debates on the Energy Bill in 2011, I noted that the current Minister of State for Energy and Clean Growth served on the Bill Committee. Given her familiarity with the legislation and the wider points debated in Committee and other debates, surely she would want to lead in fixing this mess. Indeed, as this mess has unfolded, it has become clear that the governance arrangements were not fit for purpose. Interestingly, the SNP spokesperson at that time, the former Member for Angus, Mike Weir, raised concerns on Second Reading, saying:

“One of the problems with energy mis-selling was that it was a long time before many of the cases came to light. Does the Minister have any thoughts on ensuring that the standards that are to be imposed on those selling green energy are regularly inspected to ensure that any problems can be detected at an early stage?”

The Minister responded:

“I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will keep all elements of the green deal under close review... we will need continually to monitor all aspects of it, especially those relating to selling and mis-selling... If we identify any areas in which we think improvements can be made, we will not hesitate to make them.”—[Official Report, 14 September 2011; Vol. 532, c. 1049.]

Unfortunately, Mike Weir has been proved right. The UK Government did not uphold their end of the bargain regarding the governance and review that they said they would undertake.

On governance, the length of the loans alone should have prompted an automatic red flag. The 242 complaints about cold calling between October and December 2014 offering “free” solar panels should have resulted in much quicker clampdown on the actions of HELMS, but the Government were too slow to act. We know what the then Energy Minister, Greg Barker, thought of HELMS—he praised it for its entrepreneurial start-up skills. Mr Barker is okay now: he stepped down in 2015 and was promptly made a life peer in the House of Lords. The Secretary of State for Energy at that time lost his seat in 2015 but was knighted in the 2016 new year honours list and is now back as an hon. Member in this House. I am sure that my constituents will want to know why those who got it wrong have been rewarded and, as we have heard, those who have been wronged are still fighting for justice and have been ignored by the UK Government.

As we have heard, someone else who did okay out of this was the director, Robert Skillen, who was up to his neck in it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, Mr Skillen has some brass neck to come back and campaign to widen green deal installations elsewhere.

When will we hear why they pulled it and what lessons were learned? While the Tory Government has stood back, it has been left to MSPs, MPs and citizens advice bureaux to try to assist affected constituents, but we are doing so with both hands tied behind our back because we do not have the address information. Only the Green Deal Finance Company, and therefore the Government, know exactly who has these green deal finance deals from HELMS. Again, that is why we need Government intervention. Before I conclude, I must put on record my tribute to the work done by my local CAB, particularly Linda Corbett, who has done fantastic work on digging into HELMS, understanding the issue, taking it forward and helping people, and to a local constituent, Isobel McNicol, who started a HELMS awareness and campaign group. However, it should not be left to those people to act; Government intervention is needed.

In the ministerial response to me the Government rejected the assertion that the whole issue is shrouded in secrecy, but I suggest there is still not enough transparency. We need to know how many people have been defrauded of their feed-in tariff. In response to a written parliamentary question of mine, I was told that it is not the Government who hold the information on whose feed-in tariffs have been transferred, but Ofgem. The Government need to get an understanding of the matter, because we have heard that there has been widespread fraud on the transferring of feed-in tariffs.

As others have said, this has been a flawed energy policy from the start. The problems will set back efforts to get people to sign up to future energy efficiency measures. Some people who are fuel poor and deserve to have energy efficiency measures installed in their homes will be afraid to do so. The Government must get a grip, set up a compensation fund, do a proper investigation and start taking collective action.

10.33 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This debate revolves around a number of issues—not just the question of one rogue company, but wider issues relating to the nature of the green deal programme when it was set up, what it decided to do with regard to redress arrangements, how the relationship of payment to reward was set up, and various other issues. That positions the debate firmly as being about the Government’s response to a number of these issues, not just the legal responses to a particular company that has clearly acted reprehensibly in engaging customers in deals that were anything but green and anything but advantageous to them.

I therefore congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) on securing this important debate. It is a debate that goes back to when the green deal was set up in the first place, with the Energy Act 2011. As the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) observed, the current Energy Minister participated as a member of the Bill Committee. I think the hon. Gentleman will also be aware that I,
too, was a member of that Committee, and many of the issues that have been raised this morning concerning aspects of the green deal were raised during the process of bringing the Act into being.

One particular issue that I and others raised during passage of that Act was the concept of the golden rule in the green deal. The central selling point was that people would never pay more than they would get back in savings from arrangements relating to the green deal—what they would save as a result of green deal treatments would always be greater than what they paid up front.

It was pointed out during the passage of the 2011 Act that that idea was an elastic concept, and that it was always going to be difficult to get the right balance in the relationship between payments and savings. It is that aspect of the green deal that HELMS appears to have taken particular advantage of. In fact, it is fair to say that the company systematically exploited every single weakness in the green deal in its approach to customers. It took not only all the feed-in tariff from customers, but the export tariff, which it put into a separate company. It made a lot of money out of that customers. It took not only all the feed-in tariff from customers, but the export tariff, which it put into a separate company. It made a lot of money out of that process, because the feed-in tariff at that point was pretty generous to customers, yet it still engaged customers. It took not only all the feed-in tariff from customers, but the export tariff, which it put into a separate company. It made a lot of money out of that process, because the feed-in tariff at that point was pretty generous to customers, yet it still engaged customers in loans for those properties.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) have mentioned just how many of their constituents were systematically victimised by this scam. They were victims not only of a scam, but of a scam that appeared to them to have been authorised by the Government. During the passage of the 2011 Act, considerable efforts were made to ensure that the green deal was authorisable by Government, but not enough efforts were made subsequently to ensure that what was authorisable by Government was actually sound and authorised by Government. As hon. Members have mentioned, in the early stages a number of companies such as HELMS were praised by Ministers as great examples of companies that could be properly authorised and could safely go around carrying out green deal arrangements.

As hon. Members know, the green deal was a complete fiasco and was closed down by the Government shortly after they took office following the 2015 election. Members may recall a former Energy Minister saying that he would not sleep at night unless millions of people had taken up the green deal. The number who did take up the green deal was clearly a big factor in the low take-up. Indeed, as Members have attested to today, it is a factor in the overhanging debts that a number of people have, for up to 25 years, as a result of the mis-selling by HELMS and one or two other companies. This is not a happy tale at all. What we have heard about today are particular aspects of a wider scheme that was pretty flawed in both concept and execution.

Of course, on top of that is the fact that the Government not only withdrew from the green deal but then sold the whole loan book to a private company, the Green Deal Finance Company. It is now landed with a number of complaints, because the Government are effectively saying, “It’s nothing to do with us; it’s the Green Deal Finance Company, a private company.” It is fair to say, as hon. Members have reflected on, that the company is trying to do something about the overhanging debts that a number of people have as a result of being on the green deal loan book. Indeed, there are several reports of the Green Deal Finance Company reducing the loan debt of particular people to a level at which it does match the requirements of the golden rule, so that they are not continuing to pay more on their bills than they are saving in energy charges. But that is only scratching the surface, because only a few people have been dealt with in that positive way by the Green Deal Finance Company. There is clearly a much wider issue, which relates back to how the green deal was set up. A redress system was not built into the green deal as it unfolded, and the mess that resulted from those shortcomings is still with us today.

It is incumbent on the Government to take much greater responsibility for their own mess, for the consequences of the weaknesses in the green deal as it came forward, and certainly in the case of HELMS, a company that the Government were talking up, shall we say, until fairly shortly before it went out of business, with all the problems attached to that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister today what proposals the Government have to take this matter forward in a positive way. I note that, in answer to a written question at the beginning of the year, the Government said that they were actively involved with bodies relevant to this issue and hoped that there would be a resolution. I would be interested to know the bodies with which the Government have been involved in discussions, what they think would be an active resolution to this issue and how they are progressing with that active resolution.

My personal view is that it is imperative that some active resolution is brought about across the board, because this is a reputational issue for any future energy efficiency or home improvement scheme. If customers engaging with those schemes have no confidence in the schemes working, they will not happen. It is absolutely imperative that we get energy efficiency and green energy schemes going in this country as part of the challenge of decarbonising our energy systems and uprating the energy efficiency of homes across the country. It is important that that gets under way for the future with a clean slate and a clean bill of health for what is being done.

It is therefore incumbent on the Government, in order to foster good will towards future energy efficiency schemes and to put right the wrongs of the past, to actively engage in finding solutions to the problems of mis-selling that we have heard about this morning and to consider the wider issue of the deficiencies of the green deal scheme and the need to ensure that we get it right for any successor schemes, whether privately or publicly funded, in future.
their constituents. We have a shared wish to see proper redress for consumers who have been mis-sold green deal plans. I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the case of Mr and Mrs Murray. We listened to his account of the sadness and horror that they have experienced.

I want to make a particular point at this stage. As the Minister responsible for consumer protection, company law and the insolvency process, I place it on record that the Government are committed to ensuring that rogue directors, rogue traders, are investigated, in the interest of protecting consumers. I feel very strongly about that in this role and, obviously, my other roles in Government.

In total, Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd, which I shall refer to as HELMS, was responsible for selling 4,581 green deal plans. Of those, 3,068 were sold to households in Scotland and 293 in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. We understand that about 460 consumers have made complaints about the green deal plans provided to them by HELMS. That is a substantial number and it is a real concern, but let us remember that a large majority of green deal plans run smoothly, without complaint.

Most complaints focus on the fact that HELMS led consumers to understand that there would be no cost to their installation. HELMS gave consumers the impression that that was possible because of the nature of the Government’s green deal scheme. Consumers were then surprised to see green deal payments appear on their electricity bills. Many consumers were unaware that they were entering into a credit agreement, or of the opportunity that they had to cancel their agreement. That runs counter to what the green deal is about—enabling consumers to install energy efficiency measures through a loan and then repay through the resulting savings on their energy bills.

The consumer’s position was often worsened because they were persuaded by HELMS to assign elsewhere the rights to any feed-in tariff from the measures. HELMS encouraged many to transfer their feed-in tariff rights to a separate company—one related to HELMS—as a contribution to the costs of their installation. That meant that consumers could not put that potential funding stream towards meeting the costs of the green deal plans, and HELMS failed to inform the consumer of the impact.

Before saying more about the HELMS cases, I shall provide some background on the green deal. It was launched by the coalition Government in 2013. Under the green deal, consumers can borrow money to fund improvements and repay the loans over time through their electricity bills. In the case of solar PV, consumers can begin to use renewable energy generated on-site in their homes. The savings can then be used to repay the loan. A principle called the golden rule, which has been mentioned today, is in place and intended to ensure that loan repayments do not exceed expected savings.

It is true that at the time the Government and, indeed, the hon. Members from across the parties had high hopes for the green deal. But it failed to take off to the levels expected. Various reasons have been offered for that. They include its complexity and the fact that it did not properly consider consumer demand to undertake energy efficiency improvements in this way. The original scheme design was not perfect, but we and others believe that the pay-as-you-save mechanism at the heart of the green deal can still play a valuable role in the future. We have published the summary of responses to our call for evidence and will consult on proposals in due course. The right consumer protection will be paramount in any reformed scheme.

We want to improve the green deal, but it is far from being the only game in town for energy efficiency. Just yesterday the House debated the Draft Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2018, under which we are looking to further improve the already successful energy company obligation scheme. Since 2013, it has led to over 2.4 million measures being installed in nearly 2 million homes.

To make things right for the consumers who have suffered from the activities of HELMS, it is important to know that there is a specific process for handling complaints under the green deal. Consumers should first approach their green deal provider. If the problem is not resolved, the consumer may then approach the green deal ombudsman or the financial ombudsman service, depending on the nature of the complaint. Ombudsman decisions are binding on the green deal provider. If the consumer is still dissatisfied, they can refer their complaint to the Secretary of State for consideration.

The liquidation of HELMS further complicated resolving consumer complaints, as it meant any ombudsman decisions against HELMS could not be implemented through the company. Therefore, my Department worked with other key parties to establish a mechanism to offer a resolution for consumers. The Green Deal Finance Company reviews those cases and, where it considers it appropriate, makes settlement offers to consumers. If they are dissatisfied with any offer received, consumers can still refer their cases to the Secretary of State under the green deal framework regulations. The Secretary of State has the power to reduce or cancel loans where he is satisfied that the consumer has suffered, or is likely to suffer, a substantive loss.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister think that, rather than the onus being on the individual to seek that assistance, the Green Deal Finance Company ought to be writing to every recipient of a loan and every customer of HELMS to make them aware of the route to getting redress, if they need it?

Kelly Tolhurst: The Green Deal Finance Company will make those offers. If they are not accepted by the consumer, the onus is on them to recommend the case to the Secretary of State and for him to take the decision. That is the redress process that we have put in place.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way again. She said that roughly 10% of people who have a HELMS green deal have instigated a complaint. Therefore, 90% of those sitting on these deals have not complained, and many do not even know that they have been conned. That is why the Government have a responsibility to contact them directly and begin investigating, to see what help they can give.

Kelly Tolhurst: If that has not already been done, I am sure it will be looked at. I am not sure whether it has been done or not, as I do not have that information.
**Gavin Newlands:** The Minister spoke about the compensation that effectively comes through the Green Deal Finance Company. Does she think it right that a private company, which had nothing to do with the initial mis-selling or scamming, is left to deal with this issue and possibly £20 million of compensation to consumers, instead of the Government, whose scheme it actually was?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** As a Government, we have worked with the Green Deal Finance Company to establish the redress system. That is why it can make offers and has done so. I will repeat the process again. If consumers are not happy with the offer that has been made, they can refer the case to the Secretary of State. We understand that only 100 offers have been accepted and 52 have been referred to the Secretary of State, so I encourage consumers to refer them to the Secretary of State. So far, only one decision has been taken on a HELMS case, but the Department is considering the evidence in other cases before the Secretary of State decides what sanction, if any, is appropriate. We expect more decisions to follow shortly.

From the outset, the green deal was subject to a monitoring regime administered by the Green Deal Oversight and Registration Body, which started investigating HELMS in October 2013 and concluded with a report in March 2015. Based on that report, the Government concluded that there had been significant consumer protection issues with the company, and the then Department of Energy and Climate Change imposed a final sanction on HELMS in November 2015. In September 2015, the Information Commissioner’s Office issued HELMS with a £200,000 nuisance calls fine—its largest ever at the time—after ruling that it “recklessly broke marketing call regulations.” Soon afterwards HELMS stopped issuing green deal plans, and in March 2016 it entered into liquidation.

I regret that it is taking some time to reach conclusions in many of the cases, but I would like to assure everyone that my Department is focused on progressing them as quickly and fairly as possible. We need to ensure the necessary evidence on substantive loss being incurred and to allow time for representations to be made.

Notwithstanding such mis-selling issues, let us be clear that solar PV in the UK is a success story, with rapid deployment over the last eight years. We are now exceeding our projections on solar PV deployment. In 2013 we estimated that solar capacity would reach 10 to 12 gigawatts by 2020, but the latest figures indicate that we now have over 13 gigawatts of solar capacity installed in the UK—enough to power over 3 million homes.

As I have said, I would be happy to meet with trading standards and the constituent of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North—I want to get a greater understanding—but will quickly answer some of the questions raised, so that the hon. Gentleman has time to wrap up.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his point about Northern Ireland. The green deal has not applied in Northern Ireland, because some of these matters are fully devolved. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for his comments. I would like to hear further information on the issues particularly affecting properties in his constituency, which I can pass on to the Secretary of State. I also thank the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for her comments. She is always a champion for her constituents, and where she feels there is an injustice, she stands up for them. The green deal framework ensures that payments should not exceed the period of the savings—over 15 to 20 years. Providers that do that will be found in breach and then action can be taken by the Secretary of State, including fines and stopping the actual deal. I would be interested to know about particular ongoing cases that may be of interest.

Unfortunately, we will probably never be able to completely eradicate mis-selling but, as a Minister in this Department, it is something I feel strongly about. Where it does happen, we will try to have the best processes in place to deal with it. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North for securing this debate and I look forward to seeing him in the future.

10.58 am

**Gavin Newlands:** I appreciate the Minister’s response. Will she commit to answering in writing the questions that I asked? [ Interruption. ] For the record, she has nodded her head.

This has been an excellent and worthwhile debate. We have heard some shocking cases from across the country. The Minister’s admission that the scheme is not perfect may be the line of the day, such is the scale of the understatement. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) noted that only 10% of HELMS customers have complained, which highlights the fact that so far we have only dealt with the tip of the iceberg. There is much more to come.

The Chamber might not be full, but I remind the Minister that, as she said, 3,000 homes in Scotland and around 4,500 across the UK have been affected. I accept that the Government did not intend this to happen. What has happened is the unintended consequence of ineffective regulation and oversight. There is nothing we can do about the past, but the Government can still do the right thing by putting a compensation scheme in place, tightening up the regulations for any future green deal offers and taking some responsibility. I urge them to do so as soon as possible.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered home energy and lifestyle management systems and the Green Deal.
Future of BBC Parliament

11 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of BBC Parliament.

It gives me great pleasure to speak in praise of BBC Parliament, which is the most watched and most successful dedicated parliamentary TV channel in the world. In a good month, when there is controversy in this place, BBC Parliament has a reach of more than 2 million viewers. It is true that the average age of those viewers is quite high, with 60% of them over 60, but as I approach the age of 60—I would not presume to guess your age, Mr Robertson, but I am 57—I think that might not be such a bad thing, because many people involved in all our political parties are the “young retired”, which is a growing age group that needs to be served.

The whole population may not have noticed but BBC Parliament in its current form was under serious threat over the summer, and I want to speak in praise of the people, in this place and elsewhere, who saved it for the nation. Those people include the director-general of the BBC, Mr Speaker, the Lord Speaker, and the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). I intend to tell the story of what happened, which is a good story with a happy ending. I will do three things in my contribution: look at the history and the context of parliamentary broadcasting, consider the controversy over the summer, and try to point the way for the future. In 10 years, when, I anticipate, I will be retired and watching Yorkshire play cricket, where will BBC Parliament be?

While I was preparing for the debate over a cup of coffee in the Members’ Tea Room, I looked up and saw a picture of John Wilkes, which reminded me that the reporting of this place has never been straightforward and simple. There has always been controversy. My 14th birthday, 24 February 1975, happens to be the day that this House debated whether to televise Parliament.

In the end, the House decided not to televise Parliament but instead to start experimenting with radio. Coverage began on the radio, and BBC Radio 4 listeners were up in arms about the afternoon play being shoved aside sometimes, but the experiment went on, and three years later it was confirmed that the BBC and others would be able to broadcast parliamentary proceedings on the radio permanently. I remember when I was 18 listening to Michael Foot summing up for Her Majesty’s Government against the vote of no confidence that finally brought the Government down by one vote. I remember being impressed by the atmosphere and the argument that night as I listened to the radio. That coverage was not easily achieved, however, and the debate then turned to television.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a timely debate, given the context that he has laid out. He talks about things that are not easily achieved. Does he agree that, in a wider context, what should be more easily achieved within the BBC is more openness and transparency regarding how it commissions programmes, spends money and deploys resources? There has been a veil of secrecy over much of the BBC. I do not make any assertions about BBC Parliament, but about the BBC more widely. We need to get to the nub of the matter in a wider BBC context.

I have applied for debates in this Chamber—thus far unsuccessfully, but hopefully I will be successful in the next few weeks—so that I can elaborate to some considerable degree on the complete lack of transparency and openness in the BBC more widely.

John Grogan: Openness and transparency are always to be encouraged. I wish the hon. Gentleman luck in pitching for a future debate, at which I hope to be present.

The debate about television and Parliament was heated. The late Howard Wilson, who was my father’s hero, is mentioned in the Crossman diaries asking Crossman whether the BBC would be able to cut the video tape up, take a bit of speech and introduce it into a magazine programme. Crossman replied, “Certainly,” and Wilson concluded that that could not possibly be allowed. In the 1972 debate, the Conservative Back Bencher Brian Batsford said:

“The introduction of the cameras will bridge the gulf which has widened so much between Parliament and the people.”—[Official Report, 19 October 1972; Vol. 843, c. 468.]

The 1970s were a time of conflict in Northern Ireland and of industrial strife. The nation was divided, people said. One BBC executive said, perhaps rather hopefully:

“What then is our public attitude? It is to let the different voices speak for themselves.”

He was in favour of parliamentary broadcasting.

To move the story on, the other place was more progressive. It brought in cameras in 1983, some years before the Commons finally decided to so in 1988, after no fewer than 11 debates in the preceding 14 years. Ian Gow was the first person to be seen on screen.

Without going into all the details, broadcasting in the ’90s was organised through a consortium of cable channels that went under the name of the United Artists cable channel. It broadcast Parliament until 1998, but perhaps the viewing figures were not as high as it had hoped when it took on the contract, so it wanted to pull out. There was a big debate in this place about whether it was appropriate for the BBC to take over. The discussions and negotiations went on for some months, but then a deal was done between the BBC and Parliament and live coverage began. Connoisseurs of BBC Parliament will remember that in the early part of this century, the lack of bandwidth on Freeview TV was such that the pictures of the Commons in operation took up only a quarter of the screen and there were various captions. As the decade went on, digital TV improved and the BBC got more bandwidth, and we got BBC Parliament as we have it today.

That brings me to the second part of my remarks. This summer, the day after Croatia beat England in the World cup semi-finals—if there could be any bigger blow—it leaked out that, as part of several changes to political programming that the BBC was going to make, BBC Parliament was not going to continue in its current form. The proposal was not to totally discontinue the channel but to remove any of the associated programming. Even the captions were under threat. The BBC would have continued to take the feed from this place and the House of Lords and so on, but would not have broadcast
during parliamentary recesses. It would only do the very basics, and no doubt that that would have come under threat in years hence.

I am the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary BBC group and I recognise the tremendous pressures that the BBC is under. It has to save £550 million by 2021-22. BBC News, which took the decision to try to scale back BBC Parliament, has to find £80 million in that period. I realise that there are challenges for the BBC management, but the cost of BBC Parliament is such that they would have saved only about £500,000 by getting rid of most of the staff. The transmission costs of BBC Parliament are nearly £7 million and another £1.7 million is spent on content and distribution, so the really significant money is in actually transmitting the channel, which I will come back to in a minute.

What happened then was that at a sitting of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee just before Parliament went into recess, Lord Hall was asked by the Chair if he would be pulling all of the additional edited programmes on BBC Parliament. Those programmes obviously include things such as the coverage of the conferences and of Select Committees, but there is also a book programme about political books and a host of programming based on anniversaries, including of general elections. Indeed, there was programme a few years ago on the anniversary of Winston Churchill’s death, with a replaying of his funeral and so on. All this associated political programming would have gone. Recently, Steve Richards has done a series in the old style of A.J.P. Taylor really, just extemporising—rather like I am doing now—for a period to the camera, and his theme was “Prime Ministers” who never quite became Prime Minister, and so on. As I say, all of that programming would have gone.

Lord Hall suddenly said in reply to the Chair of the Committee:

“I want the edited programmes to continue. Let me just say we are constantly reviewing what we do...Could we do this better? Could we do it more effectively? But do not read into that necessarily something that we intend to do.”

That was a glorious moment. Some in the House may have watched “W1A”, a BBC comedy about the inner workings of the BBC—there was a similar comedy about the inner workings of the Olympics—and this was a “W1A” moment. The poor press officer at the BBC then had to issue a press release saying:

“As the director general has said, certain programming on BBC Parliament will continue as before”.

That was a very elegantly achieved U-turn.

Then the Speaker stepped in and he also made representations, so it looks now as though BBC Parliament will continue very much as before, with its current staffing levels, producing the range of programming that I have referred to. It really is important also to have the captions on the screen. Another programme that BBC Parliament has made is the “A to Z of Parliament”, which explains different things we do here in Parliament—for example, Divisions—to the public. In that sense, there is a good story to tell about BBC Parliament, but as I said earlier, today I want to look ahead and consider what BBC Parliament could be like in 10 years’ time. How can we attract more people—perhaps more younger people—to watch it and how can we take it forward?

I remember that about 10 years ago, when I was previously in the House, I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), now Deputy Leader of the Labour party, to save BBC 6 Music and the BBC Asian Network on the radio. I would like BBC Parliament to improve and expand, rather like BBC 6 Music has in the 10 years since it came under threat. How might BBC Parliament do that? It is obviously a question of resources and so on, but if the BBC put its mind to it, working in association with the parliamentary broadcasting unit, it could do for Parliament what it has done for things such as the Olympics, the FA cup and so on. It is a common theme in the BBC now to have My BBC—a digital concept. If I am interested in Bradford City’s results I can get an alert from the BBC about those results, or if I am interested in a particular area of news I can get alerts about programming in that area of news.

I think the parliamentary broadcasting unit now has, on some days, no fewer than 20 transmissions from various Committees around this House. There must be a way of linking those transmissions in to the promotional power of the BBC. Indeed, Lord Hall said in the Select Committee hearing:

“For example, could we...work with the parliamentary website to allow people to search more easily by topic, to have notifications when they are being brought up in the House? Could we extend our service in that sort of way, too, so that if you are particularly interested in...say the A303...every time that came up in Parliament you were told it was about to come up”.

I understand that Lord Hall, who has a very progressive vision, may well meet the Speaker to discuss that. As a vice-chair of the APPG on the BBC, I will write to the Speaker and the director-general of the BBC suggesting that the director-general to come into Parliament and perhaps have a seminar—if the Speaker would host that in his house, it would be great—about the future of BBC Parliament, with the authorities of the House present as well, to consider how we can improve the channel’s digital output.

In years to come, TV will probably change again. In recent years, all TV sets have switched to digital. There was a tremendous effort by the private sector and the Government, who worked together to make that change happen. In the future, something similar will probably be done with connected TVs. At some stage in the future, we will probably all have connected TVs, so I guess that eventually the BBC will make savings on the transmission costs of BBC Parliament. In the years ahead, it is really important that BBC Parliament remains a terrestrial channel that everyone can access, regardless of income. I hope that that has been achieved, but it is also important that we consider how the broadcasting of this place, the other place, our Committees and so on can be reviewed, to refresh it for another age. I say that because one of the things that has happened in recent years is that many young people have become involved and interested in all sorts of politics. BBC Parliament has done a massive and magnificent job for our nation over the last 20 years or so, and I would like to see it doing a similar but different job in the years to come for the generations to come.
11.15 am

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Thank you, Mr Robertson, for calling me to speak. This is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, and I am delighted to do so.

I almost forgot that I had to respond to the debate, because I was enjoying the contribution by the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) so much. I thank him for that and I congratulate him on securing this very important debate on the future of the BBC Parliament service. He made a marvellous speech, taking me back to the ‘70s, when my interest in politics was first inspired. He mentioned people such as the late and lamented Ian Gow, and he even alluded to that marvellous night—from my perspective—of the no confidence motion that brought Britain’s first woman Prime Minister to power.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Harold Wilson, who he said was his father’s hero. Actually, in my young years I revered Harold Wilson, as I believe did Michael Portillo, so he had many admirers; he was the most amazing politician and an inspiration of the ‘60s and ‘70s. I was also fascinated to learn that the House of Lords stole a march on us by five years; I did not know that it was the first House to agree to broadcasting and that it took the Commons so much longer.

The hon. Gentleman made various recommendations. I shall certainly listen to the programme by Steve Richards on the politicians who never quite made it to becoming Prime Minister. There might be a subsequent series on the politicians who never quite made it to becoming Prime Minister. There might be a subsequent series called, “The Prime Ministers we never had—thank God!”  [Laughter.] Perhaps I had better not dwell on that point. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman’s contribution was fantastic and I learned so much from it.

The BBC is rightly one of the UK’s most treasured institutions. It sets a fantastic example as a world-leading—indeed, the world-leading—public service broadcaster. There are BBC programmes that are perhaps off the point, such as “Planet Earth”, “Strictly Come Dancing”, the “Today” programme—I am sure we all enjoy that—and “Bodyguard”, but all of those outputs come from the licence fee, which allows the BBC to reach UK audiences everywhere, through the TVs in our homes, the radios in our cars and, of course, the devices in our pockets or on our wrists.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does she agree that, despite having outlined some of the magnificent programmes that the BBC makes, there are issues with the BBC in a wider sense? For example, I have just come today from the National Audit Office in London, as I am trying to establish more openness and transparency for the BBC. Given that it receives almost £4 billion of licence-fee-payers’ money from the public purse, it needs to be much more open about how it spends that resource and accounts for spending it.

Margot James: I think that all large organisations are on a journey to become more transparent and accountable. Indeed, the BBC’s annual plan sets out clear commissioning priorities, and transparency is fundamental to that. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of this, but Ofcom is currently consulting on the commissioning process, including the transparency of that process. If that consultation is not yet closed, I urge him to contribute to it. Ofcom expects to make a statement about the matter by the end of this year.

Crucial to the BBC’s duty to provide impartial and accurate news is the building of people’s understanding of the UK, its democratic processes and the wider world, so that all audiences can engage fully in those processes as active and informed citizens. I am sure that the hon. Member for Keighley is aware of the BBC’s Democracy programme, which is all about facilitating greater democratic accountability and participation at a local level.

Scrutiny of politics—local and national—is vital, and the BBC provides a window for the public into discussions and debates. I did not know that the parliamentary broadcasting unit broadcasts an average of 20 different sessions of Parliament a day. That is absolutely fantastic, and BBC Parliament is an absolutely key part of delivering that unique responsibility, providing unparalleled openness and transparency by allowing viewers direct access to everyday political activities, not just here in Westminster but in Holyrood, Stormont—when it is sitting—and Cardiff, and helping them to make sense of the business of politics, through clear insight and explanation and links to other BBC sources. The channel contributes directly to genuine engagement in UK political life through the programmes it shows. Live daily coverage of how decisions are made and how the public is represented allows people to watch and listen to their representatives and hold them to account, and viewers can watch repeats of sessions on topics they are passionate about but may have missed because of the demands of everyday life.

As I said, BBC Parliament delivers significant coverage throughout the UK’s regions, showing, in the last year, 427 hours from the devolved Assemblies—an enormous amount that exceeds Ofcom’s quota for the channel. That coverage provides a critical link between voters and their representatives, and shines a light on the issues that affect everyone, regardless of where they live and work. That is an encouraging sign that the BBC is fulfilling its public duties, and it demonstrates the value of the BBC Parliament service.

In addition, weekly edited BBC Parliament programmes, such as “Today in Parliament”, which I enjoy, when I can, at 11.30 in the evening, and “The Week in Parliament”, deliver tailored insight into and analysis of the business of the day. A great example, which regretfully I am yet to see, is “Suffragette Allies”, which was broadcast as part of the BBC’s year-long celebration of the centenary of women’s partial suffrage.

BBC Parliament, as the UK’s only channel dedicated exclusively to politics, is an example of the public service ethos that lies at the heart of the BBC, providing a service that cannot be provided by anyone else. The monthly reach of the dedicated parliamentary channel is almost 2 million viewers and listeners, and the average BBC Parliament viewer watches the channel for almost two hours a week, which is a significant volume of viewing by person and speaks to the value that the channel delivers. The hon. Member for Keighley noted the average age of the viewers and listeners—I am that age, being over 60. However, although I am passionate about encouraging the BBC to attract younger viewers and listeners, we do not want that to be at the expense of, but rather as well as, people over 60, or 50, or any other age. It is all to the good that BBC Parliament will remain, and I was interested in his comments about its future.
All of that is delivered with a content spend of only £1.6 million, which was just 0.1% of the total BBC television content spend last year. I am not privy to the reasons for the BBC’s review of the channel, but the golden rule about saving money that I followed when I was in business was, “You can only save money from where money is.” As that 0.1% is a very small budget to start with, I trust it will be safe from that kind of scrutiny. It obviously needs to deliver value, but the hon. Member for Keighley and I have made clear the enormous value that such a modest spend generates. At a time when misinformation and fake news are rife, safeguarding trusted, impartial and accurate political coverage for audiences in the UK and beyond is more important than ever.

Underpinning all of that is the BBC’s independence. As hon. Members know, the BBC is operationally and editorially independent from the Government, and rightly so. Independence means that the BBC can make tough editorial decisions to robustly hold Parliament and the devolved Assemblies to account, and to scrutinise our actions without fear of reprisals. Independence allows the BBC to help voters understand and engage with parliamentary and political events. Voters trust that BBC coverage is accurate and impartial. I know that there are challenges to that trust, because I receive letters from people—

Mr Gregory Campbell: So do I.

Margot James: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s earlier comments. Trust must constantly be earned; it can never be taken for granted.

The welcome news, which the hon. Member for Keighley mentioned, is that the BBC recently announced that its planned cuts to edited daily and weekly BBC Parliament programmes will not now go ahead. I am very pleased to hear that decision, which I am sure we all welcome. I am reassured by the BBC’s comments to me that political and parliamentary content has a strong future on the BBC. I trust that the BBC will take note of the hon. Gentleman’s good ideas about looking to the future of the parliamentary broadcasting unit, with the development of artificial intelligence, notifications and all manner of automatic transmission opportunities that are more personally targeted at viewers’ and listeners’ interests. There is a great future in that. The hon. Gentleman has invited the director-general into Parliament, and I will encourage him to take up that invitation and join in any meeting that can be convened.

In an increasingly digital world, I am excited to see how the BBC has responded to the campaign. I wholeheartedly support its ambition and look forward to hearing further about its plans for the parliamentary broadcasting unit, which does such valuable and important work. I now leave a few minutes to the hon. Gentleman, in case he wishes to contribute further.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): He cannot do so.

Margot James: I am never quite sure, Mr Robertson; I have done these debates so often and in some I have been admonished for not leaving time.

I could never run out of things to say about the BBC. We are so fortunate in this country to have this truly great public service broadcaster. I am grateful, again, to the hon. Member for Keighley for teaching me so much about the parliamentary broadcasting unit and its offer, and some of the history of the whole thing. It has been marvellous.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
Drugs Policy

2.30 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered drugs policy.

The UK’s drugs policy is not just a combination of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and a host of schedules and classifications; a range of laws has been developed and put in place over the years, guided by our perceived knowledge and our current attitude. We put those laws in place because we thought it was the right thing to do, and I believe that we got it wrong.

Outwith drugs law, we have laws that regulate the production, distribution, marketing and consumption of alcohol. Alcohol is an interesting case, because it is not included in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. It remains socially acceptable. It is consumed openly at christenings, naming ceremonies, weddings, civil partnerships and even funerals—society finds a place for alcohol at hatches, matches and dispatches. However, it was not always that way. Prohibition and abstinence were once very strong movements. In the 1920s, some states in the USA made alcohol illegal, and something strange happened. Prohibition, rather than stopping people drinking alcohol, delivered production, distribution and consumers into the hands of criminals who recognised a money-spinning venture when they saw one. The product became more potent, because that meant distributing smaller quantities while maintaining profit margins, and criminal gangs used extreme violence to protect their territory from rival gangs or gangsters. Levels of violence spiralled, and more and more people were criminalised for using alcohol.

According to the academic and historian Michael Lerner:

“As the trade in illegal alcohol became more lucrative, the quality of alcohol on the black market declined. On average, 1000 Americans died every year during the Prohibition from the effects of drinking tainted liquor.”

When prohibition ended, levels of crime dropped dramatically and people’s health improved. They continued to drink alcohol, but the product was quality controlled and monitored, and nobody had to use violence to protect their market.

To this day, alcohol continues to damage people’s lives and ruin their health, but it is legal and regulated. Increasingly, people can find educational support, because they have no fear of being criminalised. Maybe in an ideal world, everybody would be so happy and content—so free of stress and anxiety, so confident and self-assured—that there would be no requirement for alcohol, or indeed any recreational drugs. However, we do not live in that ideal world, and we never have. Throughout history, for a variety of reasons, people have taken drugs. One hundred years ago, people could buy cocaine, heroin or morphine at pharmacies and department stores. During the first world war, Harrods sold kits of syringes and tubes of cocaine and heroin for the boys on the frontline. Queen Victoria recommended Vin Mariani—wine laced with cocaine. Anthony Eden was prescribed purple hearts throughout the Suez crisis. Those people lived under what was termed “the British system,” which was a light-touch approach to drug consumption, one of tolerance and treatment.

Things changed during the 1960s. In 1961 the UN single convention on narcotic drugs was passed. It was not popular in the UK, because we could see that the British system was working. That convention, driven by prejudice, became the only UN convention ever to use the word “evil”. Torture, apartheid and nuclear war do not warrant the term “evil”, according to the UN. Genocide is referred to as “an odious scourge” or “barbarous acts”. The term “evil” is reserved for drugs—drugs that had previously been available in many different guises in high street pharmacies. The stigmatising of users went up a gear. In 1971, through the Misuse of Drugs Act, criminalisation became the name of the game. The result has been years of violence, tensions and organised crime, and a monumental increase in addiction.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a first-class speech. Could he say roughly what proportion of people in prison are there because of the drugs trade? What are the costs to the criminal justice system, and what is the total social cost of drugs? I hope he will cover those points in his speech.

Ronnie Cowan: I did not know there was a quiz. I have a prison in my constituency—I was talking to its governor two or three weeks ago—and the majority of the prisoners are there for offences related in some way, shape or form to the consumption or sale of drugs, or to the drugs market and the violence around it. We also know that there are more drugs, particularly synthetic drugs, available in our prisons than out on the streets.

Members will be glad to hear that the Office for National Statistics began collating consistent data on drug deaths in England and Wales from 1993. Those figures show an increase in drug misuse mortality rates among both men and women since 1996. UK opioid-related deaths rose between 2012 and 2015, increasing by 58% in England, 23% in Wales, 21% in Scotland and 47% in Northern Ireland. UK Focal Point on Drugs estimates that the number of problem drug users is 300,000 in England, 60,000 in Scotland and 30,000 in Wales. Those statistics are the result of current drugs policy, and behind those statistics are lives in ruins.

I fully understand why people exposed to the cruelty inflicted on their loved ones by current drugs policy would want to lash out in retribution. If somebody provided one of my loved ones with a pill at a music festival, and that pill killed them, my initial reaction would be to hunt the seller down like a dog and have them strung up. I would be wrong. At the next festival, somebody provided one of my loved ones with a pill at a music festival, and that pill killed them, my initial reaction would be to hunt the seller down like a dog and have them strung up. I would be wrong. At the next festival, another person would be selling the same drugs to other people, and another tragedy would unfold. This understanding is exemplified by the members of Anyone’s Child, who have been directly affected by the loss of, or damage caused to, a close friend or family member. Those people understand that vengeance will not bring back their loved one or undo the damage done. They understand that unless we change our current drugs policy and how we enforce it, more innocent people will die. It is their desire that their experience of loss does not fall on anyone else’s family member or friend. Is the Minister prepared to sit down and talk with members of Anyone’s Child? Nothing?

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and making some powerful points. He and I both attended a recent
meeting of the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group, on the topic of drug-related deaths, where we heard Rudi Forson QC explain how policies could be readily implemented to reduce drug and alcohol-related deaths. Does he agree that it would be good for Ministers to meet Rudi Forson and hear what policies could be applied instantly that would make a big difference?

Ronnie Cowan: It is always good when I hear that people like Rudi Forson QC—a person who has lived his life through the law—are looking at the current situation and thinking, “We have to change this.” It backs up everything I believe, but Rudi Forson’s background makes him much more qualified in those terms than I am. I wonder whether the Government are engaging with people of his calibre.

Last week, Canada joined nine states of the USA and Washington DC by legalising recreational cannabis. Various provinces of Canada have taken different approaches regarding age limits: some allow people to grow their own cannabis, limiting them to four plants, while others do not allow home growing. We should be looking to those parts of the world to gather evidence and decide whether their approach is beneficial, and whether we should follow suit. Canada has the same problems as us but, like Portugal, Uruguay and other countries, it has taken a different approach to providing a solution. That solution is not “drugs for everybody”;
it is “regulate the marketplace and take control away from the criminals”.

In the UK, parents who fear that their child might be dabbling in drugs, or even developing a habit, are extremely reluctant to engage with support groups that could divert their child from the path they are on. The parents are reluctant because they do not want to place their child on the police radar. They fear that their child could be arrested, get a criminal record or even be sent to prison. Early intervention can be the key to avoiding drug-related harm, and we should not be putting obstacles in the way of those who could be affected. We must encourage users to engage without fear of prosecution and free up police time and resources to fight crime. Will the Minister tell me whether the UK Government have engaged with other countries to access their research, which could assist us in becoming better informed and in taking an evidence-based approach to legislation? We need to listen to those affected, who can see a need for change but are not in a position to effect it.

Prior to this debate, the Westminster digital engagement team put out an appeal on social media, advertising the debate and asking the people of this country, “What do you think?” Nearly 20,000 people were engaged. The majority of the responses came back saying, “Legalise cannabis.” Some called for drugs to be regulated and taxed. A few said that they had lost loved ones as a result of the current policy. Some commenters called for drug addiction to be seen as a health issue, rather than a criminal one. Lots of commenters called for the UK to take the same approach as Portugal. That is the people of this country talking.

The problematic users, the kids on estates recruited to county lines, the medical professionals, the support workers and the law enforcers should be listened to. Peter Bleksley was a young cop during the Brixton riots. He went on to become one of the Met’s most celebrated undercover agents. He was a founding member of SO10, Scotland Yard’s dedicated covert policing unit. He said: “I look back now and think, well, are there less drugs and guns on the streets because of what my colleagues and I did? And of course the answer is an emphatic, NO. We could wallpaper my bedroom with commendation certificates—they sit in the loft gathering dust. What a waste of time.”

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The UK Government spent an estimated £1.6 billion on drug law enforcement in 2014-15. Drug treatment has been cut by 14% in the past couple of years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a false economy, especially as Public Health England estimates that for every pound spent on drug treatment, there is a £4 social return?

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely agree. If we could see the results from the money being spent on the criminal justice system, I would back off and say, “Well, it is working”, but it clearly is not. To extend the hon. Lady’s point, every £1 spent on early intervention saves £7 in the criminal justice system further down the line. Even if someone does not give a damn about these people, it makes good financial sense to step in anyway and get early intervention.

Peter Bleksley is not alone. A host of personal testimony has been gathered by the Law Enforcement Action Partnership. I will offer four more examples from these experts. Patrick Hennessey, a British Army officer in the Grenadier Guards who served in Afghanistan, said:

“In Afghanistan I fought on one ‘front-line’ of the so-called ‘war on drugs’ and in Hackney I live side-by-side with the other and it’s obviously failing at either end. If real generals pursued an actual war like generations of politicians have pursued this farce they’d be court-martialed and sent to prison.”
Paul Whitehouse, chief constable, said:

“Far from making communities safer, current drug laws have the unintended consequence of placing barriers between the police and often vulnerable individuals.”

Graham Seaby, a former detective superintendent in the international and organised crime branch of New Scotland Yard, said:

“The drug problem will continue and escalate if governments fail to recognise that the only way forward is to move towards nuanced regulatory models, thus removing the profit from criminals, and the motivation for their involvement.”

Francis Wilkinson, chief constable, said:

“The single greatest crime reduction measure the world could take would be to regulate the supply of cannabis, cocaine and heroin.”

Neil Woods, 14 years an undercover drugs cop, would say exactly the same things. Ron Hogg and Arfon Jones, both police and crime commissioners, say that drugs must be a health issue, not a criminal justice one.

Every time we lock up a criminal gang or announce to the media that we have seized a large quantity of drugs with a street value of so many millions, what they do not say is that that supply has been disrupted for an hour or so. Another gang will step into their shoes and get early intervention.

Often those takeovers involve a spate of violence, and such networks are always maintained by violence and the threat of violence. The fact is that after 30 years of locking people up, a bag of cocaine that cost £10 in 1980 will cost £10 a day for the same weight. However, because cocaine is so plentiful, it is purer in the UK today than it has ever been. The damage being inflicted on people and communities will
continue to increase if all we do is crack down on the criminal fraternity and those ensnared in problematic drug use. We can lock people up for longer, but it does not improve their situation one iota; in fact, it makes it worse. Will the Minister meet and listen to members of the Law Enforcement Action Partnership?

In July 2017 the UK Government published their drug strategy and announced that they would appoint a recovery champion, whose role was defined as someone who would “be responsible for driving and supporting collaboration between local authorities, public employment services, housing providers and criminal justice partners, ensuring that these critical public services are able to contribute fully towards securing effective outcomes for individuals suffering drug dependence.”

Fifteen months later, there is still nobody in the role, so nobody is co-ordinating those aspects of the support and recovery programme. I find myself wondering whether there is a UK Government harm reduction recovery programme. When will the Minister appoint a recovery champion?

As legislators, we have a choice. We can change the law. In doing so, we can address the harm that drugs do. Before that, we have to take a constructive approach to our drugs policy. We need to accept that 90% of people who use recreational drugs do not live chaotic lives. We must acknowledge that of the 10% of users who become problematic users, the majority have suffered physical, psychological or sexual abuse. We must acknowledge that problematic use is higher in areas of social deprivation. We must accept responsibility for trying to find solutions and acknowledge our failures. We need to help people with problematic drug use through harm reduction, treatment and wraparound support. Criminalising users does not deal with the underlying issues that lead to drug use; it only makes things worse.

We should have a network of safe drug consumption rooms throughout the UK. They have proved to be a success in Switzerland, Canada, Spain and a growing number of other countries. We must be prepared to learn from other countries’ experiences. The emergency services should carry naloxone and be trained in its use. Will the Minister reconsider legalising safe drug consumption rooms and ensure that naloxone is provided for members of the emergency services? Most importantly, UK drugs policy should be a health issue, not a criminal justice one. Alternatively, we can continue to criminalise users and drive them into the hands of unscrupulous dealers, while ignoring the atmosphere of fear that they live in. All we do is marginalise, stigmatise and ostracise them.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has just moved on from the subject of drug consumption rooms, but did he note that after his last debate on drug consumption rooms the International Narcotics Control Board produced a report effectively endorsing them. That came from the body responsible for the international enforcement of the relevant drugs conventions, which I know he and I think are outdated and dangerous, frankly, in the global consequences they deliver on drugs policy. If even the INCB is in that place, I hope our Government will take some notice.

Ronnie Cowan: I noticed a couple of things after that debate. In it, the Minister denied that Canada had kept its drug consumption rooms open because they are effective. She made a statement that the Canadian Supreme Court had ordered them to stay open. On the back of that, the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy wrote a five-page letter to the Minister and I, detailing how the DCRs are working effectively in Canada and why they have been kept open. They described her statement as “neither factually nor legally accurate.”

We have lost the war on drugs. Our drugs policy saw to that. We need to change our mindset and ensure that we are in a position to win the peace. Finally, when we see a problematic drug user, we are watching a person drowning. We should throw them a lifebelt, not push their heads further under the water.

2.49 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing the debate. It will soon become apparent that I disagree with large parts of what he has said; in a democracy it is quite correct that we can take two sides of the same argument. However, I agree that the effects of drug use, and the deaths caused by it, have an impact on each and every one of our constituencies.

Drugs and drug addictions are among the worst scourges of our society today. According to the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, the cost to the UK economy of drug misuse is more than £15 billion a year. Far more importantly, drugs destroy lives and livelihoods, tear apart families and communities, and fuel crime and exploitation. Although the number of drug users is falling, the number of people dying or being admitted to hospital due to drug use is on the increase.

In Scotland, it is nothing short of a crisis. The rate of drug-related deaths in Scotland is considerably higher than in England and Wales. It is estimated to be the highest in Europe, yet every year the number of deaths hits a new record high. The same goes for hospital admissions. In 2016-17, the rate of people being admitted to Scottish hospitals in relation to opioids, cannabinoids, cocaine, and sedatives and hypnotics reached new records.

The crisis can and will get worse. The county lines operations, which the hon. Member for Inverclyde mentioned and which are spreading across the UK, bringing a supply of drugs to rural communities across the country, are particularly concerning for me as a Member of Parliament for a rural constituency. We know from examples abroad, most notably in America, how the supply of drugs to rural areas can bring devastation to those communities.

The challenge facing the Scottish Government, the UK Government, and all of us is not just to stop the problem spiralling out of control, but to turn the tide altogether and tackle the havoc that drugs are wreaking on so many lives. More certainly needs to be done to treat people who have become addicted to drugs.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the cost to society and to the Government of £15 billion a year. How much would it cost if the Government changed their policy, and heroin addicts went to their local NHS clinic to get their fix in the morning and evening and there was no drugs crime at all because it was free at the point of need, administered by the national health
[Kelvin Hopkins]

Douglas Ross: To borrow the phrase of the hon. Member for Inverclyde, I did not realise that this was a quiz. I do not have those figures to hand.

Labour Members mentioned past cuts to alcohol and drug partnerships, and received some sympathy from the Scottish National party Member leading today's debate. Yet the SNP-led Scottish Government have not helped, especially considering their cuts to alcohol and drug partnerships in Scotland. The money spent is being reduced not just here in England, but in Scotland under an SNP-led Government.

Likewise, the forthcoming revision of the Scottish Government’s national drug strategy cannot come a moment too soon. The current strategy is a decade old, but reflects a much older approach, where instead of helping people to defeat their addictions, they are put on, for example, endless methadone programmes. Is it any surprise that the proportion of people dying from drug overdoses who are on methadone has risen from 21% in 2009 to 37% in 2016? The new strategy, which comes out next month, must address that, and focus on beating addiction completely.

Ronnie Cowan: I wonder whether at some point the hon. Gentleman will offer some solutions, or is he just going to try to pick apart what we currently have? I have admitted that the current systems are damaging people. We are trying to build solutions—has he got any?

Douglas Ross: I am not sure that we heard any solutions from the hon. Gentleman. Normally in such debates we hear about how great things are in Scotland. As a Scottish Member of Parliament, I think it is appropriate, when we are discussing an issue that is of importance to the United Kingdom, that we put it into context.

I invite the hon. Gentleman and the Scottish Government to consider the “National Drug-Related Deaths Database (Scotland) Report”, from June this year, which said that the Scottish Government’s flagship take-home naloxone programme “has not prevented substantial increases in opioid-related deaths in Scotland.”

That is a quote from a report in June this year. If the hon. Gentleman would like to question that report, I will give way again.

Ronnie Cowan: Absolutely. We are in the process of rolling out a naloxone project in Scotland that has been taken on board. I visited drug consumption rooms in Barcelona during the summer. Quite unsolicited, the staff mentioned to me the good work being done by the Scottish Drugs Forum and the naloxone programme. They have taken it on board in Barcelona, and it has been a terrific success.

Douglas Ross: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is questioning me or the “National Drug-Related Deaths Database (Scotland) Report”. That report, which was issued in Scotland in June, said that the Scottish Government’s policies have not reduced the number of people dying from related illnesses.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It makes good sense, and is soundly medically based, to give people who may take an overdose a way of correcting that overdose with a lifesaving intervention. That has to be a good thing to do. I understand that there are tensions with the SNP on this issue, but it is considered good medical practice to do exactly as is being recommended in Scotland and in England.

Douglas Ross: I know that my hon. Friend and I disagreed in our last debate on UK drugs policy in Westminster Hall. These are not my conclusions, but those of a national report that has looked into the policies of the Scottish Government and said that, however well-meant the policies are, they have “not prevented substantial increases in opioid-related deaths in Scotland.”

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: I am sorry—I have given way a few times, and I know that a number of Members wish to speak.

We need an approach to addiction that is more ambitious than methadone and take-home naloxone, and certainly more ambitious than self-injection rooms. We need an approach that puts recovery first, but we need to tackle addiction and the drugs trade together, because there are no victimless crimes in drugs. We cannot simply separate it into matters of public health and criminal justice, because recreational use, addiction, exploitation by gangs and suppliers, and the supply chains of drugs into and across the country are all bound together.

If we want to give people the best chance of recovery from addiction, we have to tackle the supply chains. That means enforcing the law properly, not soft-touch sentencing and back-door decriminalisation. By making it harder to import, produce, supply and possess drugs, we make it easier to get off drugs and overcome addiction. From the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 to the new financial crime unit to seize the assets of drug lords, and to the recently announced review into the link between the drug market and violent crime, the UK Government have demonstrated that they recognise that. I only hope that the Scottish Government recognise it too, and act before the crisis gets any worse.

2.56 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this important debate.

I think the tide is turning in terms of people’s willingness to look at the evidence, whatever preconceived ideas they have. I must admit that I am a convert; I have looked at the evidence and realised that what we have been doing for the last 50 years is not working. I have been out with the police on drug raids in my constituency. I have seen the effects in older industrial areas where these problems are manifesting. We need a new approach.

I will focus my remarks on one issue, which the hon. Member for Inverclyde has already touched on, that I would like the Minister to consider: consumption rooms. I am looking for the Minister and the Home Office to
empower and resource police and crime commissioners, and allow them to take some progressive actions and interventions. For example, in pilot areas, where there is support for such an initiative, there could be medically supervised consumption rooms to treat addicts and reduce crime.

For members of the public who may be alarmed at that prospect and are unsure what a drug consumption room is, it is a supervised clinical environment where people with a diagnosed drug addiction are provided with medical-grade heroin, clean equipment and facilities to safely dispose of used needles. In debates in public and in this place, they have been unfairly characterised by opponents and, more disappointingly, by organisations such as the BBC, which I would hope would take a more careful and considered view on the use of such terminology, as “shooting galleries”.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the effectiveness of safe drug consumption rooms—a critical issue for my constituency, where the drug-related death rate is 1,000% higher than the EU average. Glasgow also has an HIV epidemic. Does he agree that there is a real concern that correlation may be confused with causation? Much of the evidence that has been cited to show that safe drug consumption rooms are not effective does not necessarily show that.

Grahame Morris: It is really important that policy be evidence-based. With all due respect to the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), many of whose concerns I share, shooting galleries do exist. We might not like it, but they exist, unauthorised and under no medical supervision, in our communities, in private dwellings, in derelict properties, in residential areas, near schools and behind shops. [Interruption.]

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. I shall suspend the sitting for 15 minutes if there is one vote, or 25 minutes if there are two. We shall resume as soon as hon. Members return and Grahame Morris is in his place.

3 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.23 pm

On resuming—

Grahame Morris: Before we were summoned to vote we were talking about drug consumption rooms. If it is in order, Mrs Moon, I will remind the Minister that she pointed out that she believed that such drug consumption rooms were currently available. Perhaps she can clarify that in her closing remarks, but currently users buy drugs of unknown strength or quality and inject what is in many cases poison, with dirty or used needles, which can be discarded on the street for a child to pick up or a pet to stand on. Without any other option, that seems to be the Government’s preferred drugs model. It is a system that funds criminality, maximises harm for users and puts children and communities at risk.

Why have I changed my mind to support drug consumption rooms? Many Members may have had the same experience that I have had. Not a week goes by when I do not receive inquiries. Constituents send me photographs of used needles discarded in the street, at intolerable risk to public health. I firmly believe that consumption rooms would substantially reduce the public health risk, by closing down illicit shooting galleries and moving things to a clean, safe clinical environment away from residential areas, where needles can safely be discarded and those with addiction issues can engage with health services and move towards a drug-free life.

I understand that supervised heroin treatment costs about £15,000 per year per patient. However, that is three times less than the cost of keeping someone in prison—the most likely destination for someone committing crime to fund a drugs habit. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) asked about that. As has been mentioned, it will be no surprise that more than 80% of the adult prison population reported using illicit drugs at some point prior to entering prison, and almost two thirds admitted using them in the month before they entered prison. More than 40% of prisoners have used heroin.

Dealing with one problematic adult drugs user costs society about £45,000 a year, and estimates suggest that illegal drugs cost the UK taxpayer as much as £16.5 billion a year. So there are wider costs than the purely financial considerations of drug treatment. The Home Office suggested that about 45% of acquisitive offences are committed by regular drug users—heroin, crack and cocaine users. Crimes such as theft, burglary and robbery, which are common in many communities, can often be traced back to those who are trying to fund drugs habits, and it is those types of crime that the police struggle to investigate, to detect those responsible. That type of crime may be considered petty or low level, but it has a significant impact on the victims and on their confidence in the police, their personal safety, and their security in their homes.

Another cost to consider is the £7 billion drugs market that funds organised crime. The 50-year war on drugs is failing to resolve it. Treating drugs use as a health issue rather than a criminal justice matter will strangle the illegal market and take power away from the dealers. We have previously heard testimony or quotations from serving police officers. There is ample evidence from people at the sharp end, including a former police officer, Neil Woods, who worked in undercover drugs operations for 14 years and wrote a best-selling book called “Good Cop, Bad War”, which was recommended to me by a superintendent in my area.

Crispin Blunt: It was called “Good Cop, Bad War”.

Grahame Morris: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I apologise. The author said that, for all the users and dealers he helped to put behind bars, he disrupted the £7 billion British drugs trade for less than a day. Clearly, what we are doing is not helping. We are losing the war on drugs and failing to protect the public. I implore the Minister to accept that, after 47 years, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is not fit for purpose. The drugs mortality rate in the north-east is twice that of the west midlands and three times higher than that of London. The costs are simply too high. I hope that the Minister will facilitate a new approach to drugs and empower those who are in authority in my constituency.

Mary Glindon: As to those statistics, the fact that the north-east has a far higher rate of death from drug misuse compared with London shows that there must
be a link between deprivation and drug use. I think Alex Boyt, of Blenheim, would like that to be looked at further. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Grahame Morris: I am not an expert, but it seems there is a correlation between areas of deprivation and areas with a high incidence of drug-related death. There is a lot of evidence out there, and from anecdotal experience it seems that an issue that was confined to the big cities is now commonplace in older industrial communities, such as the areas and villages that I represent.

Ronnie Cowan: I have seen a slide that shows the areas of greatest deprivation in the United Kingdom, and if a matching slide is put beside it that shows the areas where most harm is done by drugs, those maps pretty much match each other slide for slide.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely—I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. In conclusion, I implore the Minister to facilitate a new approach to drugs policy and to empower authorities in my constituency, such as our police and crime commissioner, Ron Hogg, and Chief Constable Mike Barton—in the only police force in the country rated outstanding by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary—who want to try a new approach. Will the Minister allow a pilot scheme so that we can at least evaluate the evidence and see whether it works, as many experts believe it will?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I now call Jim Shannon, but seven Members still wish to speak before I call the Front-Bench speakers at 3.54 pm. Could we please have restraint from hon. Members, so that we can hear from as many of those who put their name forward to speak as possible?

3.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will adhere to your guidelines, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) for securing this important debate. He will be well aware that we approach this topic from different angles, but I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute.

I am deeply concerned about Canada’s recent decision to legalise cannabis—undoubtedly the driver behind today’s debate—and its potential impact in the UK. That said, my concern lies with the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use, rather than medicinal use. I want to talk about the negative impacts and dangers of legalising cannabis for recreational use. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) referred to the mortality rates in England, and the figures are clear. The number of deaths among both males and females continues to rise, and that is due to many things, including heroin and morphine abuse, but I want concentrate specifically on cannabis. I will come to the side effects and dangers of legalisation later, but first I will consider the rationale for legalising cannabis use—as a bid to reduce the number of criminals who make money from selling cannabis illegally.

Taking money from criminals and reducing the amount of goods on the black market sounds like a no-brainer, but will the policy of legalisation really make the fundamental changes that President Trudeau envisages? Under the new legislation, it will still be illegal to sell cannabis to under-18s—under-19s in some provinces—and illegal to buy it from anyone who is not a licensed dealer. To my mind, it is simple: the policy will not stop criminals making money. Minors will still have access to drugs, and it is they who are most at danger from the side effects of cannabis use.

Short-term effects of cannabis include confusion, anxiety, sleepiness, memory loss and feeling sick or faint. There are also effects on a person’s ability to learn or concentrate, as they become uninterested or demotivated. People begin to use the drug in their teens. In my constituency I am well aware of the problems caused by illegal drugs, which are usually peddled by paramilitaries and criminals to anyone who wants to buy them. Those who do not want to buy drugs are recruited, and my constituents have seen at first hand the detrimental effect on the health of those who became involved with drugs at an early age, and indeed on their families who have to pay back the debts. There is a spiral of drug use.

The figures speak for themselves. According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, cannabis use in Canada is slowly on the rise. It tends to be younger people who use the drug and they are the ones most at risk, yet the new legislation does nothing to safeguard minors. We need to protect the poor, the needy and the vulnerable—that is the thrust of all our comments today. We just have different ways of doing that. Making a drug legal simply makes it more accessible and incentivises those who may not have used it previously—perhaps those in the slightly older age bracket—to buy it.

Criminals who were previously selling cannabis on the black market will continue to do so, and they will continue to supply minors, so minors may be at even greater risk than they were before the legalisation. Let us be frank: criminals will always find a way to sell drugs and supply them to minors, and I worry that the drug’s new status will inadvertently offer more protection to underage users. A young person could be walking between home and college with a brown paper bag clearly in hand, and although certain states have banned smoking cannabis in public spaces, it is not an offence to buy it or to carry the purchase home. Of course, I realise that if someone is obviously underage, they are likely to get stopped and asked for ID, but that will not happen in all cases. Lots of young people will simply be brazen enough to carry cannabis visibly and take the risk of getting stopped. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, in 2010 Canadian youth ranked first for cannabis use among young people in 43 countries. Scientific research over the last 15 years has established that the human brain continues to develop into a person’s early 20s, and there is a strong association between daily cannabis use and depression in adolescents and young adults.

I have spoken many times in this place about legal highs or psychoactive substances. Their use by young people is a real concern. In my constituency of Strangford,
I have seen at first hand the devastating impact that using those drugs can have on families. Many of the drugs produce a similar effect to cannabis, and it is the feeling of being “high” that makes them so attractive to people. Ultimately, if people want drugs and the demand is there, they will find ways to get them. That demand has led to products such as spice being added to the regular menu of illicit street dealers. Often, new legislation merely changes the way that a drug is sold or produced, rather than fundamentally changing the demand for drugs or the nature of drug taking.

I do not believe that legalising drugs for recreational use can ever be a good thing in practice, and neither will it work in principle. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. The Canadian legislation sends a message that buying and using cannabis has Government backing. That is dangerous in itself because it implies that using cannabis is completely safe and acceptable. It is not, and it never will be. As I said earlier, legalisation makes the drug more accessible and appealing to people who may not have previously been users, while at the same time doing nothing to safeguard minors. I am sorry that I have a different opinion from that of the hon. Member for Inverclyde, but all points of view must be heard.

3.37 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this debate, and I am sympathetic to many of the points he made. He rightly highlighted the links between the use of drugs, drug dependency and deprivation, the challenges that many people who are dependent on drugs face, such as in housing and employment, and the fact that the current criminal justice approach does not work as we would like. We should help people with drug dependency to access the appropriate health and care support they may need, and we must think seriously about whether the current prohibition on drugs is the right way forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) made a factual point about naloxone and drug use. The policy is widely used in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and all over the world. He might be interested to read a 2017 review paper by McDonald, Campbell and Strang, entitled “Twenty years of take-home naloxone for the prevention of overdose deaths from heroin and other opioids—Conception and maturation”. That paper effectively concludes that take-home naloxone coverage is insufficient—that may chime with something my hon. Friend said—and that greater public investment in such schemes is necessary if we want them to succeed. Opioid deaths and their causes are multifactorial, and a considerable body of international evidence suggests that if naloxone is given to people who are at risk of an overdose, it can save lives; many review and study papers indicate that. I believe it is a step in the right direction for the Scottish Government to confront that issue and to say that there is a good body of evidence, but unfortunately dealing with opioid deaths is not as simple as just handing out naloxone, which we know is in itself an effective measure.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the case against the end of prohibition on drugs. If we look at the wider public health issue, it is fair to say that if something is decriminalised or legalised, more people may well use that substance because it could be seen as something that is okay or acceptable to use, but I do not think anyone in this debate is suggesting that if there was a broader approach to the decriminalisation or legalisation of drugs, there would not be a public health campaign, just as there would not be legal drugs such as alcohol and nicotine, to suggest that there are adverse health outcomes associated with use.

Many substances that are classified class C or even class A have a lower public health burden than alcohol—for example, MDMA or ecstasy. Alcohol, the legal drug that many people—not me—in Parliament and elsewhere consume, is the substance that causes the biggest public health burden. We must be realistic and recognise that if we move to a position where people are able to make a more informed choice about whether they want to consume drugs in the future, that informed choice involves telling people that taking certain substances has consequences, as we do with alcohol and cigarettes today.

On the current approach to drugs, I would like the Minister to pick up on a couple of points. First, there is the challenge of improving the care that we provide for people who are dependent on drugs. This is not an issue for this Minister, but it may be a conversation to be had with the Department of Health and Social Care. The current commissioning landscape in England for drug and alcohol services is fragmented and completely divorced from mental health. We have to recognise that mistake, which we made in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. That needs to be addressed if we want to improve the quality of care available to people who are dependent on opioids in particular, as well as alcohol or any other substance.

It is important to recognise that improving care for people who are dependent on substances is about taking a holistic approach. It is about law enforcement working together with healthcare, housing and social care, and about finding employment and retraining solutions for people. The way existing law is framed, alongside the criminal justice prism through which drug laws are seen and enforced, often drives a wedge between different agencies, preventing them from working together effectively for the benefit of people who are dependent on illicit or street drugs. I hope the Minister can look at that point. Many opioid users are struggling to get treatment. In recent years, there has been a rising trend in the number of opioid deaths, yet the number of people with addiction to heroin and opioids accessing treatment has fallen in the last 10 years or so. There is a problem here that needs to be addressed.

We often talk about being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime—I think a former Prime Minister said that, and it is something we can all agree with. What good treatment for people affected by substance misuse is not about is being tough on crime and being tough on addicts. That does not work, it has not worked, and it is driving a wedge between the health system and the people it is trying to support. I hope that we can recognise in our broader discussions about prohibition that the current policies are a barrier to people with drug dependence receiving the care and support that they need.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I am keen to make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. I suggest that people have a self-imposed speaking time of three minutes. That will leave a little less time for the Front-Benchers, but I would like to make sure that everyone gets the chance to air their view. I call Jeff Smith.
Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I will be as brief as possible, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this debate and on his long and strong advocacy on these issues. I am tempted to say only that I agree with everything that he said, because I do, but I have a few brief comments to add.

First, I want to say how disappointing it is to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places today, not because I have anything against either of them personally, but because I hope that one day we will have a debate on drug policy where a Health Minister and shadow Health Minister answer the debate. For too long, we have treated drug policy as a Home Office and criminal justice issue rather than the health issue that it should be.

My starting premise is that we will never stop people wanting to take drugs. Humans have taken psychoactive substances for thousands of years. Our brains like them—it is not our fault; they just do. If we are honest, people take drugs because, often, they are enjoyable, whether it is alcohol or one of the illegal drugs. Most people enjoy taking them. Most people take them without problems most of the time. Sometimes, however, use becomes problematic, whether it be of alcohol or illegal drugs. We do not tackle problematic alcohol use by banning alcohol. That would be absurd, so why is it any less absurd that we ban drugs that cause problems when used wrongly? We need to make a distinction between problematic use and recreational use that causes no harm.

We have a drug policy that is not working, as has already been said.

Is the clock counting down the time for my speech?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): It is counting up.

Jeff Smith: It is counting up. Have I really had all that time? I cannot quite believe how long I have been speaking for.

Not only does our drug policy not work, but it causes problems, not least through unnecessary criminalisation. In 2017, nearly 38,000 people were unnecessarily criminalised, which leads to poorer life chances and a cycle of prison. Then there is the cost: if we include all the costs of policing, healthcare, the judiciary and so on, it costs £10.7 billion to deal with illegal drug use.

The policy is not working. Drug supply is in the hands of organised criminal gangs and that leads to an arms race in violence, trafficking and organised crime. Then there is the stigma, which has already been referred to, that even without changing the law many drug-related deaths are preventable. As Members have said, we could encourage the Minister to look at that carefully.

I laud the work of agencies and of many sincere individuals on the ground at the frontline. I have spoken to many of them in recent months, and they all tell me that even without changing the law many drug-related deaths are preventable. As Members have said, we could certainly have safe consumption facilities. We could also have heroin-assisted treatment. The reality is that the best way to get somebody off an addiction is first to manage it so that they can regain some control over their addiction, and one of the first things we did was go to an accommodation block for young people, where we tested their rooms for drugs. The police had swabs that they pushed along surfaces in the whole block, and under examination they revealed whether the young people had taken drugs. It was not the first time those rooms had been tested. Many of the people had been tested before and many had come up positive before. This was retesting.

Members might ask why, if those young people had been caught once, they did not do something different the next time, but that is part of the problem. The police took the view that it was not something that needed to be enforced in law. They took the view that there was no point in making criminals out of these young people.

There is a real distinction between the policy that the Government have set out and are pursuing and the policy that the police are pursuing at the same time, and those two policies cannot live together. We cannot have people saying one thing and the other people, who are supposed to be a part of the organisation that delivers it, doing something completely different. The Government need to recognise what is actually happening on the ground, because the police are not implementing legislation in the way the Government think they are. They are doing that with a greater spirit of openness about what is good for those young people in the community, and I encourage the Minister to look at that carefully.
their lives and begin to make plans. We could also remove the stigma—there are far too many people in our society who react to these deaths by saying, “They’re only junkies; their lives don’t really matter.” We have to say that those people were once valued members of a community and that they could be again, and we need to reach out to them. Finally, we could shift the emphasis on to harm reduction through a massive publicity programme.

I do not have time to say what I wanted to say, so let me just make an appeal to the Minister. There are cross-party concerns about drugs policy, and there is cross-party support for a new initiative from the Home Office to review the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. We deal with no other area of public policy where the principal legislation has remained unchanged for nearly half a century. The problem has got dramatically worse and its character has changed. Far too many people are labouring under the misapprehension that prohibition means control, but it does not. There is no control over what substances come on to our streets, there is no control over how much is available, and there is no control over who is using them. There ought to be, and we have a responsibility as legislators to move forward and achieve that. A review is long overdue, and I implore the Minister at least to be receptive to these appeals.

3.54 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing the debate. The UK does not operate alone, and neither do global drugs control policies. The UK Government, as a fully paid-up member of UN treaties, must acknowledge and take ownership of the failure of global drugs control policies and the harms that are done in its name—the so-called war on drugs. It is actually a war on the people who use drugs, because it is they who feel the sharp end of prohibition. Some 26 countries have made changes to domestic laws and policies concerning the possession of illicit drugs for personal use in order to protect their citizens, but the UK lags behind.

It is not really a war on drugs; it is a war on citizens’ behaviour, and it is most often delivered by the state against the poorest people and communities. We do not put drugs in prisons; we put people in prisons. We allow the market to regulate itself because we simply prohibit drugs. It is a market, and it will not go away or be managed by simply investing in more police or in border control efforts—it is like trying to make gravity illegal. We cannot be naive and seriously think that there is any way forward but to reform policies to make them fit for today.

That brings me to the long-standing issue of the Glasgow safer drug consumption facility and heroin-assisted treatment pilot project, which has cross-party support in the city, certainly from Labour and the Scottish National party. As hon. Members might be aware, the issue of drug use and drug-related mortality in Glasgow is particularly acute. It is a problem that necessitates radical and disruptive new approaches. Almost a third—267—of Scotland’s drug-related deaths in 2016 occurred in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board area. In Glasgow there are 283 drug-related deaths per 1 million people—an appalling 1,315% higher than the EU average. There are 13,600 people aged between 15 and 64 in the Glasgow City Council area who are problematic drug users, which is twice the national average in Scotland.

That is why the safe drug consumption and heroin-assisted treatment proposal is vital for our city, to improve its public health performance in this area. I met the Minister recently and we had a productive discussion about the issue of safe drug consumption rooms and heroin-assisted treatment. Although we disagree on the safe drug consumption room pilot, primarily over assurances about the safety of the substances that are brought into the facility, I propose that there are methods of testing the substances prior to their being used on the premises, but that is beside the point. I want to focus on where there is a possibility of moving forward in the short term to deal with this pressing issue in Glasgow.

I want to ask the Minister whether she can outline more robust measures to improve and expedite the heroin-assisted treatment pilot programme. How can we get that on the ground and move it forward? I want to see people being able to use drug-related equipment in a safe environment and in a way that can be controlled, and I want the substances that they are using to be assured. That is the only way that we will make an impact on the ground in Glasgow and the only way that we will be able to address the appalling level of drug-related deaths. I would like to focus on the heroin-assisted treatment side of the proposed pilot in Glasgow. Let us focus on delivering something on the ground within the next year—let us get it on the ground and do something as a starting point at least. Will the Minister elaborate on how she can do that?

3.57 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mrs Moon; I did not think that I would be called, because earlier I was chairing an all-party parliamentary group meeting. I am more than happy to speak in the debate and to represent my constituents on this really important issue. As other Members have said, the issue of drug consumption rooms in Glasgow has reached a public health crisis point. We absolutely need to do something. Glasgow has a well thought through and evidenced proposal for a drug consumption room in the city.

What frustrates me hugely is that all the Home Office Ministers are happy to sit behind their desks down here in London, but they are not happy to come to Glasgow to meet people from the Scottish Drugs Forum or the doctors and experts within the Glasgow health and social care partnership who have worked on this proposal and who know their field extremely well. They do not want to come and listen to the stories of the families in Glasgow whose lives have been blighted by drug misuse for many years. Some families have lost not just one child but two children, and there are grandchildren who now face the prospect of growing up without parents.

The Government are literally deaf to those people’s complaints. They are unwilling to come and listen to those who have come through recovery, who have used such a facility, and who have seen the difference it made to their lives. They have seen the difference, rather than injecting in dirty back lanes, in bin shelters and in tenement closes in the area I represent and beyond. The Minister will not come and listen to those who use drugs right now.
The Scottish Drugs Forum has done a huge amount of work on this. They have talked to people who inject drugs in the city centre of Glasgow and they have said to them, “What facility would help you to normalise your life and get into treatment?” A drug consumption room would enable people to come in at a lower level. They do not have to commit to a treatment programme, but they can take the first step towards treatment and a better, more stable life for themselves and their extended family.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said, those people are not just junkies. We should get rid of that horrible term from our vocabulary, because it helps nobody. It stigmatises and is cruel, and it signals that we do not value those people in society. We need to turn that around and give those people the support they need to come back from the brink and give their lives some semblance of order. We cannot write anybody off in society. Doing so is not fair to those people or their families. It also costs us an absolute fortune, as people make repeated visits to accident and emergency departments, and we have to pick up the pieces of the chaos it causes. Housing associations have to pick up needles day in, day out, because this problem is not going away. The Minister can bury her head in the sand, but I challenge her to do that, because this problem is not going away.

As my hon. Friend and others have said, our starting point must be the dreadful impact that drug misuse has on too many people, directly and indirectly. We have heard about the statistics for Scotland: 934 drug-related deaths were registered in 2017, up by 66 from 2016. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) fairly pointed out that those numbers are particularly awful, but the causes are complex and some of them date back decades. There are economic costs associated with the problem—drug misuse costs £3.5 billion a year in Scotland, and alcohol misuse costs a further £3.6 billion—but they are nothing compared with the personal tragedies of each life affected. This debate has allowed hon. Members to focus on how we should respond to this huge challenge. I thank everyone for their contributions.

It is fair to say that the majority view is that the criminal justice approach is not working, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said. Some hon. Members argued eloquently that the way we regulate drug use through criminal law needs not just reform but fundamental reform. We should be open-minded about that, and I agree that our response should be evidence-led.

Regardless of how we respond, we should first and foremost see this as a public health issue—almost everybody who spoke in the debate said that, and I agree—albeit one that requires input from many Departments, including on housing, mental health, employability, education and justice. In Edinburgh, the drugs policy unit has been moved out of the justice directorate and into the health directorate. Like the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), I think that is exactly where it belongs. The 2008 drugs strategy, which has been referred to, received cross-party support, but it is being updated.

That first strategy, “The Road to Recovery”, helped to shift cultural attitudes and challenge stigma. It established a broad recovery network, delivered locally through 30 alcohol and drug partnerships. It brought together health boards, local authorities, policy and voluntary agencies in each part of the country. National leadership was provided by the Scottish Recovery Network, the Scottish Drugs Forum and Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs. It led to a new focus on harm reduction. For example, the pioneering naloxone programme was designed to reverse the effects of opioid overdoses. We have heard a bit of criticism of that programme, but a recent NHS Health Scotland literature review demonstrated that take-home naloxone programmes increase the odds of recovery from overdoses, and improve knowledge of overdose recognition and management in the community. We have also heard criticism of the substitution treatment that accompanied the strategy, but the NHS Health Scotland evidence review suggests that, overall, the health of opioid-dependent individuals is safeguarded while they are in substitution treatment.

The new strategy is set to be finalised imminently. We have not seen the final draft, but we know something of the direction of travel. We also know that it will be funded by an additional £20 million a year in each of the remaining three years of the Scottish parliamentary Session. It will contain policies that reflect a better understanding of the causes of addiction and substance abuse, including some that have been referred to today, such as deprivation, poverty and adverse childhood experiences. As has been highlighted, there will be a more holistic focus on the person, rather than simply on the addiction. Recovery remains the goal, but there will be a greater focus on tying that goal to work on homelessness, employability, mental health and family support. That is simply in recognition of the fact that, too often, the most vulnerable find it hardest to access the sustained support they need for those key issues.

The new focus will be on “seek, keep and treat”. It is acknowledged that the most vulnerable are sometimes the least likely to access the services that could support them. There will therefore be more proactive outreach and advocacy, and broader and more sustained attempts to keep people in treatment by responding to their broader needs. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) rightly highlighted that keeping people in treatment is problematic and that we need to do better on it. Treatment must be tailored carefully to the person. We must recognise that some will not be ready yet to start on the road to recovery or abstinence, while others will start on that road but relapse. Support must continue and be sustained throughout the process.

A measure that would fit with that approach, which a number of hon. Members have referred to, is the establishment of a drug consumption room. My party has been keen on that, and there is almost unanimous support for it in the Scottish Parliament. Work on piloting a safe drug consumption room would be hugely welcome. It has been driven by the Glasgow
City health and social care partnership. It could serve an estimated 400 to 500 people who would otherwise be injecting unsafely and publicly, and who would experience high levels of harm. Such a facility could significantly reduce the risk of further outbreaks of blood-borne viruses.

Evidence from elsewhere shows that drug consumption rooms can make a significant difference in reducing drug-related deaths. A Sydney study linked such facilities to fewer emergency service call-outs, an increased uptake of detoxification and drug-dependence treatments, a decrease in public injecting, and a reduction in the number of syringes discarded in the vicinity. Similar studies from Barcelona have found similar positive results.

The question is: why on earth does the Home Office not want to pilot a drug consumption room? The evidence shows that it is likely to achieve significant benefits. In the unlikely event that it does not work, the fall-back will not be on the Home Office; we will accept full responsibility. There is no justification for such intransigence.

The Home Office’s failure to act is endangering lives. I echo calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for the Minister to meet the Public Health Minister in Scotland. She should visit Glasgow to hear from practitioners who are pursuing this cause.

Tackling drug addiction must be supported across portfolio areas. Ideally, we need education to try to help young people to become resilient to offers of drugs or pressure to take them in the first place. Where the criminal law is breached, diverting people—especially young people—from the criminal justice system can be effective if alternative interventions mean addressing the underlying causes of offending, including for drugs, with hugely beneficial lifetime implications. If drug users are in prison, a dedicated improvement fund is being used in Scotland to ensure that programmes there properly address health-related causes of offending, such as drug and alcohol misuse. Each of those drugs policies could be the subject of a separate debate in their own right.

Drug addiction is first and foremost a public health issue. Our key ask is for the Minister to look again at piloting a drug consumption room in Glasgow. She has absolutely nothing to lose with such a policy, and lots of people have lots to gain.

4.8 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward—although I thought you were Mrs Moon.

Our policy on drug use should be regarded first and foremost as a national health issue. As hon. Members have emphasised, we need better legislation on drug use, with far greater intervention and education policies on drug abuse and addiction. The UK now has the highest recorded level of mortality from drug misuse since records began, and nothing is more important than preserving our citizens’ lives. Our approach to drugs is simply not doing that, so it is time to consider all options, based on what is most effective in reducing harm.

The war on drugs is failing. People are being exploited by drug dealers and traffickers on an industrial scale. The rising prevalence of county lines and sexual exploitation highlights the need for criminal action against the perpetrators. Greater training and funding for frontline services is essential to crack down on the gangs and individuals who treat people like commodities. They inflict pain and suffering on vulnerable people, and sexually abuse them.

Traffickers are targeting potential victims, including by “cuckooing”, whereby drug dealers befriend vulnerable addicts and supply them with narcotics before moving into their homes. They then threaten to withdraw the supply of drugs, or use threats and intimidation, to get their victims to sell the substances.

Homeless people are increasingly becoming the victims of modern slavery, lured by traffickers with promises of work, housing and narcotics. They are then used as forced labour to sell drugs or in other forms of criminal exploitation. This year the number of British people coming to statutory support services after being identified as victims of modern slavery has doubled. Many were homeless and had existing drug addictions, making them a target for traffickers, who used their addiction to coerce them into harmful activities. An increasing number of people have been identified as victims of slavery, ending up destitute, homeless and re-trafficked shortly after exiting safe houses.

Addiction is an illness. Young people sell themselves for their next fix and join dangerous and abusive gangs to ensure that their addiction is fed. Far more needs to be done to educate children in schools about drug use and the associated dangers that addiction brings. We are not talking about recreational drugs; we are talking about people who are dependent on a substance that dominates their ability to function.

Involvement in the criminal justice system often results from both illegal drug taking and the criminal activities to obtain those drugs. The destructive behaviours are often caused by brain changes triggered by drug use. Treating drug-involved offenders will provide us with an opportunity to decrease substance abuse and reduce associated criminal behaviour. Commitment to expand drug treatment facilities is essential to ensure a better way to cut the numbers of people who are addicted and keep them out of the criminal justice system.

We are failing people who are addicted to drugs. We have to look at where we have gone wrong. Drug addiction is not getting any better, so the existing system is clearly not working. It must be made much easier for people to get the treatment that they need. Facilities for treating people with drug issues must be improved and increased. Drug reform would be an opportunity to address the issues in the criminal justice system. It is time to think differently about punishment for drug-related offences, to increase the treatment budgets to prevent addiction and drug-related deaths, and to change drug policy so that police forces up and down the country have a uniform approach to drug addiction, allowing them to better tackle the drug battle that permeates all our towns and cities.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. As I have previously stated on the record, owing to the potential for a conflict of interest, with my husband’s business interests, I have recused myself on issues relating to
cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids. I therefore will not respond to those points during this debate, but will ask the Policing Minister, who deals with these matters, to write to Members on those points.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing the debate. His debates on drugs always seem to be interrupted by numerous Divisions, so I am delighted to have reached the point where I have a little time to sum up.

This Government recognise the serious harm that drugs cause, not only to individual users but to their families, children and local communities. Drugs have been identified in the recent serious violence strategy as a major driver of the recent increases in serious violence. Drugs cost more than £10 billion a year to our society, over half of which is attributed to drug-related acquisitive crime such as burglary, robbery and shoplifting. We remain ambitious and committed in addressing these problems. That is why we committed to further action on drugs as part of the serious violence strategy.

Our policy on drugs is anchored in education to reduce demand, tough and intelligent enforcement to restrict supply, evidence-based treatment to aid recovery, and co-ordinated global action. I will deal with the global picture first. The UK is driving global action to tackle drug harms. Genuine international challenges include the increased production and purity of cocaine in Colombia, and the problems of fentanyl use in North America. International co-operation is key. We continue to strengthen controls at our borders, share information and understand global trends. Last week, I met people from the International Narcotics Control Board who had come to view our work on tackling drugs. We will continue to work closely with our international partners to share best practice and achieve the best possible outcomes for all those at risk of harm from drugs.

The national picture, Government are already delivering a range of action is that through the 2017 drugs strategy to prevent drug misuse in our communities, support people to recover from dependence on drugs, and support law enforcement to tackle the illicit drug trade.

**Dr Poulter:** On reducing drug dependency, is the Minister aware that generic buprenorphine is no longer available from the manufacturer? As a result, drug treatment uses the Subutex brand, which costs £3,000 per patient per year and is becoming increasingly expensive. Will she look into that? It is proving financially difficult to support patients with opioid-substitution therapy.

**Victoria Atkins:** I will of course look into that, and I will ask a Health Minister to write to my hon. Friend.

The drug strategy recognises that we must reduce demand by acting early to prevent people from using drugs in the first place and to prevent escalation to more harmful use. We are taking action to build resilience among young people, alongside a targeted approach for groups at particular risk. Well-off recreational drug users must also recognise the part that they play in funding the criminal networks that supply their drugs and the violence that those crime gangs use.

My shadow, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), has already mentioned the issue of county lines. Yesterday, we had a meeting of the serious violence taskforce. It is absolutely clear that the illicit drug market is a major driver of the rise of serious violence, which is why the police must work with our health professionals to tackle it. Schools play a vital role in that, helping children to understand the risks of illicit drugs and build their resilience and ability to say no. The Government are making health education compulsory, as well as funding Mentor UK’s Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service to provide practical advice to teachers.

Tough enforcement, however, is fundamental. We are restricting the supply of drugs, adapting our approach to changes in criminal activity, using innovative data and technology, and taking co-ordinated action to tackle drugs alongside other criminal activity. Through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, we have choked off the supply of so-called legal highs. More than 300 retailers throughout the UK have closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances. Police have arrested suppliers, and the National Crime Agency has ensured the removal of psychoactive substances from sale on UK websites.

**Ronnie Cowan:** Yet those substances have been replaced by others, which are possibly more damaging, such as Spice and Mamba. We are not solving the problem; all we are doing is pushing it around the table.

**Victoria Atkins:** Interestingly, the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of decriminalisation, and I again note that no single body of opinion has formed about how such decriminalisation would work. Who would administer the drugs, presumably available on the NHS to users? Will that include recreational drugs such as MDMA, so that people can have fun at the weekend? Is the taxpayer paying for that?

I welcome the chance to discuss the issue, but the problem with such a debate is that “decriminalisation” is referred to, but not a body of opinion—certainly none described in this debate—to evidence of what would happen under such a policy. The police and others have to deal with precisely these issues day to day, to protect our communities from illicit drug use, because those drugs harm people.

**Grahame Morris:** The Minister is setting out the case for why there is an obstacle to change. In Durham, for example, the police and crime commissioner, a very experienced chief constable and all the agencies say, “Give this a try.” They believe that it will work, because the evidence suggests that. Why does she not pilot such a scheme?

**Victoria Atkins:** One or two police and crime commissioners may say that—I know, because they write to me regularly—but the majority of them do not share that view. That is not to say that we cannot have a debate about this, but let us please not pretend that that is the view of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners.

Recovery is a vital element of our approach. We are taking forward action to enhance treatment quality and outcomes. Here is perhaps where some colleagues have inadvertently I am sure—fallen into error when talking about drug consumption rooms and heroin-assisted treatment. Sometimes, people may not understand the
differences between the two programmes. We have run pilot heroin-assisted treatment programmes, where heroin users are put into an intensive support programme through their GPs or other medical professionals. They are prescribed diamorphine as part of an intensive programme of action. That is very different from drug consumption rooms, which support the illicit drug market.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will not, as I am conscious of time. People wander into drug consumption rooms, having bought their fixes on the street. We have no guarantees on the safety of those substances. The Government simply cannot condone that sort of behaviour, not least because it falls foul of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, but also because it would not be responsible to support the illegal market.

Crispin Blunt: The Government say they cannot condone that, but what lessons are they taking from the view of the International Narcotics Control Board?

Victoria Atkins: Interestingly, the view of the International Narcotics Control Board is very cautious. It says that drug consumption rooms must be operated “within a framework that offers treatment and rehabilitation services”.

I would argue that its model is closer to heroin-assisted treatment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Victoria Atkins: I have one minute left, so I am afraid I will have to refuse more interventions.

We are helping users through needle and syringe programmes, to prevent infections, and opioid-substitution therapy, and widening the use of naloxone. The Home Secretary has commissioned an independent review of the drugs market in the 21st century—it is not quite the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s, as the hon. Member for Inverclyde represented. We need to understand how the drugs market works today. That is why, as part of our drugs strategy and our serious violence strategy, working with health partners, we are convinced that this is the right approach.

4.22 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I sincerely thank everyone who has taken part in this afternoon’s debate. I mentioned that I had visited drug consumption rooms in Barcelona—I understand the difference between them and heroin-assisted treatment units. What impressed me most about those rooms were not just the facilities—they were attached to health clinics and psychiatric hospitals, and there was even a mobile unit being driven around the area—but the attitude of the people providing the service in those units. They looked upon the users of their clinics as human beings first and foremost. They had moved away from the idea of categorising and stigmatising people as junkies, crackheads and stoners. They did not see a problem but an opportunity to help people back into life.

It was summed up perfectly to me when it was explained that people living in Catalonia who have a medical card get free medical care; immigrants living in Catalonia are given a medical card, so they get free medical care; and illegal immigrants in Catalonia are given a medical card, so they get free medical care. They have taken the stance that this is about humanity and their approach to their fellow citizens. Only when we do that will we start to address the horrendous problems we have in our society through problematic drug use.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered drugs policy.
Dead Man’s Penny Memorial Plaque

4.24 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the dead man’s penny memorial plaque.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. A number of years ago, before I became a Member of Parliament, I went to a local car boot sale. Looking through all the bric-a-brac and things from days gone by, I came across a bronze plaque that was six inches in diameter. It looked to all the world like a huge Victorian penny. It had Britannia on the front, shadowed by a lion. There were two dolphins and, at the bottom, a smaller lion was ripping apart an eagle. The lion with Britannia was the lion of courage, and the other lion was ripping apart the German eagle, while the dolphins signified the dominance of the seas that Great Britain enjoyed at the time. There was writing around the edge because the plaque was intended to commemorate the life of a fallen soldier. Such a plaque was known—rather cruelly, given that it was to commemorate the life of one of our fallen soldiers—as a dead man’s penny.

The service people were from the fledging Air Force of the first world war, the Navy, which dominated the seas, and those who had fallen on the battlefields. They were originally to be positioned in the war grave headstones, but that did not happen due to the fear of metal pilfering after the war. They were struck only for the first world war as they cost so much to produce. Each plaque was struck—not engraved—with the name of the fallen soldier or serviceman.

I remember looking at the plaque—I did not know what it was; I researched it later—and wondering what had happened to the family of the fallen soldier, why the plaque had ended up there, what was the story behind it and what was the story of the soldier’s life and the family he left behind. It struck me that, more often than not, such plaques reach the market—militaria shops and auction sites—because the family have died. I found out later that more than 1.3 million plaques have been all they had left of him. I recently found out that his two other brothers also perished in the first world war. I got this plaque from a militaria shop not far from here, and the staff were very helpful and honourable in the exchange. With it came this man’s history, which says that it is a great war memorial plaque issued in memory of Charles Edward Woodward, who served as Private Nr. 1,200 of the 1/5th Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment, Territorial Force, and was killed in action at Ypres on 30 September 1915.

The local newspaper, the Lincolnshire Chronicle, reported Private Woodward’s death. A biographical note—bear with me, Sir Edward, because the type is quite small—states:

“News of the death of Pte. C. Woodward was recorded in the Lincolnshire Chronicle, he met his death while on duty in the trenches, the trench being struck by shells and he was buried. He was got out later, but only survived about an hour. The above was partly contradicted in a letter from Capt. Scorer to his parents, in which he stated ‘I have to inform you of the death of your son, Pte. C. W. Woodward, on the evening of 30th September. Our trenches were blown up by a German mine and about 60 yards destroyed. Your son was buried in the debris; we dug him out alive, and hoped he would recover, as from outward appearances he did not appear to be injured; but he died later from shock.’ Pte. Woodward was in his 21st year, and first in the village to lose his life.”

Private Woodward is commemorated by name on the Ypres Menin Gate memorial. He was only 20 at his death. He was the son of Parker and Mary Jane Woodward of Rose Cottage, Halton Fenside, Spilsby, Lincolnshire. This plaque was all that was left of him. He was a person. We should not forget that each one of these plaques signifies an individual—a person—who lost their life.

I want to raise awareness that each of these plaques signifies a person. I hope that one day they form a memorial—perhaps in the Imperial War Museum, although it will be difficult to find an area big enough to house more than 1.3 million of them—that demonstrates what they represent and commemorates those who died preserving the integrity of the democracy for which they fought proudly and gave their lives.

Sadly, however, over the years some of the plaques have been scrapped because no one knew what they were. Although I do not think many of them found their way into scrap yards, that nevertheless happened. The previous Member for Croydon South promoted a private Member’s Bill that resulted in legislation that prevents war memorials from being attacked and melted down. I would like to see some of these plaques to be covered by that legislation. They mean something. They are a memorial in themselves, especially in the centenary year of the end of the first world war.

In the great war, we lost 22 Members of Parliament, 20 Lords and 98 sons of people who worked here or were Members. This debate therefore has meaning not just for the rest of the country, but for Parliament itself. The outside of the plaque reads:

“He died for freedom and honour.”

Some plaques say, “She died”, depending on the sex of the service person. I once acquired a plaque. The gentleman named on it was Charles Edward Woodward. It had a hole in the plaque, a fact that made me a little emotional in my last debate on this subject 12 months ago, because it meant that it would have been hung on the wall, over the mantelpiece in his parent’s home. It would have been all they had left of him. I recently found out that his two other brothers also perished in the first world war. I got this plaque from a militaria shop not far from here, and the staff were very helpful and honourable in the exchange. With it came this man’s history, which says that it is a great war memorial plaque issued in memory of Charles Edward Woodward, who served as Private Nr. 1,200 of the 1/5th Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment, Territorial Force, and was killed in action at Ypres on 30 September 1915.

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What is the Government’s role? I know that they would like to do everything they can, but logistically that is impossible. It is up to us all in the community to recognise that these plaques really mean something. I would love to see some of them form a national memorial to the fallen or go to local regiments, local museums or even the Military Heritage Society.

I was honoured and fortunate enough to go to Spilsby, where I was accompanied by my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is present today. Private Charles Woodward’s plaque now hangs in the memorial hall in his own village. He has found his way home. I am proud to have done that. It did not matter where that gentleman was from or that he had no connection to me—none of that mattered at all. What mattered was that he was remembered.

It would be fitting for these plaques to be taken to church on Remembrance Sunday. My debate on this subject in the main Chamber was very emotional and eerie. I do not subscribe to the paranormal, but it really felt as though the man was standing at my side. I had never felt that before, and I doubt I will ever feel it again, but other Members who were in the Chamber at the time experienced the feeling that something else was there too. If we take these plaques to church with us on Remembrance Sunday, those soldiers will be there, too, and they will be remembered. That is all that really matters. Let us remember them, let us honour them 100 years on, and let us celebrate what they did for our freedom.

4.34 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis):** I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks, for his work on this subject and for organising this important debate, which is poignant as we approach the centenary of the armistice. One of the fascinating aspects of the first world war is what is left behind. The sheer volume of artefacts—not just medals, memorials and plaques but letters, art and literature—serves to remind us of the monumental scale of that war. It was a global conflict of shocking magnitude.

My hon. Friend has spoken with great clarity about this subject, both today and previously. I commend his passion—a passion that is understandable when one considers that the prevalence of memorial plaques is due to the almost incomprehensible losses suffered by Britain and her Commonwealth allies. It is estimated that more than 1 million plaques and scrolls of the type he described were issued to the next of kin of those who died serving with British and imperial forces in the first world war for king and country. Each of those plaques represents the loss of a life and the devastation that inevitably followed for family members and friends. More than 600 such plaques were issued to the families of women who died, reminding us that the suffering was not confined to the battlefields. Many plaques were donated, used in memorials or displayed prominently and with pride in local museums, and many are still treasured by the descendants of those who fell, but it is thought that many British and empire war dead had no plaque or scroll issued due to the inability in 1919 and 1920 to trace the addresses of eligible next of kin—no doubt as a result of the high incidence of short-term rented addresses and remarriage, and of records that were not as good as they are today.

Over the past four years of commemorative events marking world war one, my Department has seen at first hand the depth of emotion that many people still feel about that war 100 years on, not only through direct family relationships but through associations in their local communities, school connections and regimental ties. My maternal great-grandfather, Jeremiah Mulcahy of the Royal Irish Regiment, was killed in action at Ypres on 31 May 1915. I know that his loss still resonates with my mother in her 81st year. There are people who felt the repercussions of the war directly—people who grew up in care following the collapse of a family unit, or with distant or disabled fathers or grandfathers, or in communities shattered by loss. There are also people whose only connection to their community’s involvement in the great war is a photograph album, a medal or a medallion of the sort to which my hon. Friend referred—a dead mans penny, as they were colloquially known. Frequently, those items are worth far more to people than their monetary value. They are the very heart of a family or community’s history, lore and identity.

During the centenary period, my Department has worked closely with the Imperial War Museum, which has proven itself a worthy guardian of the nation’s wartime history. Through the refurbishment of its first world war galleries, which are very much worth a visit, and its tireless dedication to education, it has been a key partner to Her Majesty’s Government during the centenary period. Like all museums, it has a strict acquisition and disposal policy—in fact, as Minister for the arts and heritage, I have to sign off when it wishes to dispose of items, even if they are duplicates or of very low value—which determines whether it can accept donations. I am sure my hon. Friend understands that, given their limited space and resources, museums have to make difficult decisions about what is of most value in the context of their collections. In this case, the Imperial War Museum feels that the collection of plaques does not meet the policy criteria, and the policy document states that acquisitions outside the current stated policy will be made only in exceptional circumstances.

When the families of fallen men and women were sent the plaques and the scrolls, the items became their property, in the same manner as medals or any other award. I am sure that hon. Members will agree with me that it would not be appropriate for Her Majesty’s Government or any other body to decide what should be done with items of private property, especially items that hold such emotional significance and value. I know that my hon. Friend will understand that, for those reasons, it is not considered either possible or practical for Her Majesty’s Government to attempt to acquire memorial plaques that are no longer in the possession of the families to whom they were issued.

For people in possession of plaques, or for those wishing to research or commemorate an individual, there are other options available. I humbly suggest that Members of this House recommend to any interested constituents that a good starting point would be to visit two excellent online resources that commemorate those who fell in the great war, provide useful information about the person commemorated, and give those in possession of a plaque the option to make that information publicly available. They may find it very rewarding if they can contribute to these sites.
The Royal British Legion’s “Every One Remembered” database aims to ensure that by the end of this year every man and woman from across the Commonwealth who fell during the first world war is remembered individually by those living today. It is a striking lesson that while the way in which people commemorate may have changed thanks to technology, the desire to remember the fallen remains undiminished. I hope that hon. Members will join me in congratulating the Royal British Legion, which we know does such excellent work, on the fact that every person has now been remembered on the website—more than 1 million people.

A similar digital memorial is the Imperial War Museum’s “Lives of the First World War” project, which I also commend to the House. It records the stories of individuals from across Britain and the Commonwealth—the empire, as it was then—who served in uniform or worked on the home front. Users of the site can add information about medals and service records to an individual’s page if they have more information to add. The facility to add that information, and pictures of artefacts, allows descendants to create a permanent digital memorial of their family’s first world war story. “Lives of the First World War” currently has over 7.5 million individual life stories and over 120,000 registered members.

Her Majesty’s Government’s centenary programme has other programmes that are designed to aid commemorations, and many ways that communities can find out more about these plaques and the memorials on which their ancestors were recorded in the United Kingdom and around the world. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, has made a £4.5 million fund available for the conservation and protection of war memorials, which I think my hon. Friend mentioned. In the first world war memorials programme, Historic England, in partnership with Civic Voice, the Imperial War Museum and the War Memorials Trust, work with the public on a programme of recording, research, conservation and listing, to ensure that war memorials across Britain are protected and the people they commemorate are remembered. To date, the War Memorials Trust has made over 360 repair grants, totalling some £1.4 million, to help repair war memorials across the country that are in a poor state and need some work.

I should also mention the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in the Victoria Cross commemorative paving stones project. This project commemorates each of the 627 men who were awarded the highest accolade, the Victoria Cross, during the first world war, placing a commemorative stone in the town or village of their birth or, in the case of those born overseas, at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. The stones are a visible reminder of the heroic contribution made by local people.

No debate on this subject would be complete without mentioning the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Many thousands of casualties from the British Empire are buried in some 23,000 immaculately maintained CWGC sites in more than 150 countries around the world. These moving and sensitively maintained sites are a permanent reminder of the enormous sacrifices made in war. Anyone visiting such a site cannot help but be deeply moved. Of course, the commission does far more than maintain the resting places of the fallen. In 2017 it founded the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation specifically to keep alive the memory and the stories of those who died in the two world wars for generations to come.

With the centenary of the armistice just days away, I am very pleased to have had this opportunity to publicise the options open to people who are in possession of memorial plaques; I reiterate my gratitude to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House. Through the Government’s unique commemorative programme and the innovative work by our partners in developing ways of commemorating the first world war, we can ensure that future generations never forget those who fell. We can also ensure that they have tools at their disposal to allow them to research their ancestors and the many others who fought 100 years ago. The memorial plaques—the dead man’s pennies—and the many other memorials to the fallen of the first world war are a constant reminder of the huge sacrifice made by a whole generation 100 years ago, and I again thank my hon. Friend for proposing this debate.

Question put and agreed to.
Addictive Technology

4.46 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered addictive technology.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to introduce a debate that I feel is of growing relevance. Our discussion could go in many different directions, but I will focus mainly on the use of smartphones, apps and social media. How often these days do we hear the phrase, “Get off your phone!”? It could be uttered between two strangers in a restaurant; it could be any one of us saying it to a partner or a child, or having them say it to us. We only have to get on a bus, walk down the street or sit in the House of Commons Chamber to see examples of how engrossed we have all become in devices such as smartphones and tablets.

Last September, the iPhone celebrated its 10th birthday. At the time, my first thought was, “Has it really only been 10 years?” I do not think that was a matter of misjudging the passage of time; instead, I was reflecting on the behavioural, social and cultural impact of the smartphone revolution that began with the iPhone, and wondering how all of these changes could have happened in the last 10 years. The urge to check our phone while we are waiting for a friend to arrive, or when we are bored, watching TV or even at dinner, is like a new muscle reflex for many—including me. When we forget our phone and sense the absence of its weight in our pocket or bag, it feels like much more than just a missing piece of technology. I cannot be the only one who has felt the panic of looking for my phone, only to realise that I am holding it in my hand.

In the run-up to this debate I asked Parliament’s Digital Outreach Service to collect the views of members of the public on whether they felt their own relationship with technologies such as mobile phones, tablets, social media and videogames was having a negative effect on their lives. One respondent, Keith, said:

“As I type I’m tapping on a cell phone waiting for my bus, so I suppose it passes time. On the other hand, I nearly missed it posting this message, so yes is the answer.”

That is probably a typical experience for many people. Let us be in no doubt that these devices are incredibly useful tools. They make day-to-day tasks more convenient and we get a lot of enjoyment out of them. They give us the power to connect to our friends and families, no matter where they are, all around the world. The question is: are they making us connect less with the people right in front of us?

From the 2016 US presidential election, Brexit and the Cambridge Analytica scandal to the increase in online abuse and bullying and the growing evidence that smartphones, their apps and social media are addictive and causing behavioural changes rather than adapting to demand, we are seeing a darker side to these technologies, which highlights how we may have misplaced our sense of control. I want to use this debate to discuss how to live well with the technology we use every day.

It is becoming clearer that there are features of smartphones, the apps that they run and social media that are inherently addictive. Recently, former technology designers for companies such as Facebook, Apple and Google have admitted that the technologies and apps they designed have contributed to technological addiction. Many designers are driven to create addictive app features by the business models of the big companies that employ them, and let us remember that many apps have in-app purchases, so in some cases there are financial consequences for users. Aza Raskin, a former technology developer for Mozilla, which makes the popular Firefox web browser, has described the way in which apps and interfaces are made as if the tech companies are “taking behavioural cocaine and just sprinkling it all over your interface”.

He also said:

“Behind every screen on your phone, there are generally…a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting.”

Mr Raskin helped to design the software function known as infinite scroll, which allows users to scroll through pages and pages of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram content without having to click “next page.” He is not alone. Leah Pearlman, the co-inventor of Facebook’s “like” button, raised concerns that the design of modern personal technology and digital interfaces are habit-forming, in some cases leading to addiction. She said:

“When I need validation, I go to check Facebook… I’m feeling lonely, let me check my phone. I’m feeling insecure, let me check my phone.”

Ms Pearlman tried to quit Facebook after resigning her role at the company, but she found it hard. She realised she was “kind of addicted to the feedback.” That is someone who worked for one of these companies.

We could be experiencing a temporary blip, such as when television was first introduced. Perhaps our relationships with these devices will normalise. However, many of us will recognise these concerns in our lives.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important and timely debate. Does he agree with Arianna Huffington, who wrote the books “Thrive” and “The Sleep Revolution” in which she talks about technology and how in many cases we take better care of our smartphones than ourselves?

Ged Killen: That is right, and I will take up the hon. Lady’s reading recommendation. We all have experience of mindlessly scrolling through our Twitter feeds and finding that our mood is affected by what we see, but, as with many things, it is often young people who are affected the most. I know many parents who are very concerned about the digital world their children inhabit for much of the time. To a certain extent, that is a natural concern for parents of each new generation, but that does not mean it is unwarranted. The sheer rate of advancement in the technology now available means that young people are growing up in an environment that is completely alien even to relatively young parents, and we do not yet fully understand the consequences.

The impact on mental health for all of us is becoming clearer, with new studies emerging at increasing pace showing a link between technology overuse and poorer mental health. Large-scale studies in the US have shown that adolescents who spend more time on new media, including social media and electronic devices such as smartphones, are more likely to report mental health issues than those who spend less time on such platforms.
By comparing those studies, researchers were able to point towards a relationship between depressive symptoms and overuse of technology, particularly among women and girls.

That is just one study of many, and the science is still evolving. Compared with our understanding of other negative health habits, the timeframe for research is relatively short. We have not been using these devices for long enough to fully understand their impact. It took decades for it to emerge that smoking was an addictive habit detrimental to our health. Of course, smoking and modern technology are not directly comparable, but technology is both an opportunity and a risk, and we must ensure we get more of the former and less of the latter.

I hope Members agree that tech companies have a duty of care to the consumers who use their products. I welcome Apple’s recent intervention to introduce a screen time function that allows consumers to monitor and restrict their time or use of certain apps. I hope that will be rolled out on a wider basis by other tech companies. I also hope that social media companies and app creators such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp will stop focusing on developing new ways to demand our attention and push constant notifications at us and start developing ways that make it easier for us to switch off.

In the US, we have seen the rise of the so-called “dumb phone” that can be used in conjunction with a smartphone, allowing users to leave their smartphone at home and go about their business for the day with a featureless phone that only makes and receives calls from the same number. Perhaps we need an easier method than deleting all of our apps to turn off our smartphones’ multiple features so that they operate just as phones.

The big tech companies could be doing much more both to help us mitigate the negative effects of their technology and to help us understand it. In much the same way as the gambling industry and the alcohol industry contribute funds from their profits to mitigate the negative effects of their products, I see no reason why the big technology companies could not contribute to some sort of fund that supports research into the health impact of their products and services and helps to promote healthy use of their technology. That could apply to everything from using a smartphone to combating online abuse and bullying. I hope the Chancellor will be willing to look at that further.

Many tech companies do conduct their own research, and that is good, but these products need to be scrutinised by independent research. No industry should be able to apply to everything from using a smartphone to combating online abuse and bullying. I hope the Chancellor will be willing to look at that further.

The conversation needs to continue. I am considering setting up an all-party parliamentary group to further these discussions, and if Members in the Chamber would be interested in joining such a group, perhaps they could let me know. The Government have asked the chief medical officer to look at guidance on technology use and they may be considering setting up an internet regulator. I would be interested to hear if the Minister has any update on that in the context of the debate as well as any other thoughts she has on this issue.

4.57 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on leading such an interesting debate. It seems that technology has been developing at such a fast rate in the last decade or so that politicians, parents, teachers and many others, as well as rules and legislation, are struggling to keep up. With mobile phones now an integral part of life for most people, it is easy to understand how some may have become addicted to, or at least over reliant on, their tech.

In our work as politicians, we are expected to have a constant presence online, processing thousands of emails and absorbing thousands of messages on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, to name just some of the platforms on which some of us operate. The same is true for those in many roles in the private and public sectors—and that is before we take into account how we use technology in our private lives or in education. Screen time is almost inevitable today, so I will focus my remarks on the effects of too much of it, regardless of whether we use the term “addiction.”

It is well known that social media has an effect on mental health. My right hon. friend the Health and Social Care Secretary highlighted that when he announced this month that the chief medical officer is reviewing the impact that excessive social media can have on children’s mental health. I very much look forward to reading Dame Sally Davies’ findings, and I hope they will help parents—especially those who do not have a good grasp of social media and the internet—to understand better how to manage its use. It is unfortunately not surprising that on platforms where we show only the best of ourselves, our young people find it ever harder to feel as though they are achieving and content with their lives.

It is important not to vilify technology and blame it for all our social ills. Phones helped to bring about revolution in the Arab spring and to document the atrocious use of chemical weapons in Syria, and they have provided us with access to information that our predecessors could only have dreamed about. Social media has brought us all closer together and enabled us to stay in touch with our families and friends in a way that otherwise would not have been possible. People are now much more engaged with their representatives and the political system, which no longer feel so out of reach. Those benefits should concentrate our minds on ensuring that addiction to tech does not get out of hand and that people are trained to help when it does. In my constituency in the Scottish borders, the council is training young people in mental health first aid, which I hope will become an exemplar policy to others and go some way towards reducing the risks of tech.

I welcome the debate. I am more than happy to support the bid from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West for an all-party parliamentary group and I again congratulate him on securing this important debate.
5 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on initiating the debate. It is very timely, given how much discussion there has been recently about the impact of technology.

Let me give my own perspective. At home, my partner and I have instituted “no phones after 10 o’clock” and “no phones at the dinner table” rules. I have lost count of the number of times that I have been in restaurants and seen couples eating their dinner and then going on their phones and not even speaking to each other. I remember being particularly anxious about social media just before the summer recess. I was reflecting on it when I heard a BBC Radio Scotland programme in which the impact of social media was discussed. A guy whose name I have forgotten spoke about how he was starting to see his life through social media: we were looking at every experience he was having in the context of how it would be represented on his various feeds—Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. I thought, “Oh my goodness, I do exactly the same thing.” That really struck me and it made me stop and reflect, so when I was away on holiday in the Scottish highlands, I tried not to use my mobile phone and not to post online. I was not terribly successful. I even said in a post online that I was not going to be engaging with social media and I still failed, because I had a constituency issue that I needed to deal with.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) made excellent points about the way in which people now engage with their elected representatives through social media. I think that it is a very positive thing, but I have to say that when we are on various platforms and getting messages in our personal accounts as well as our MP accounts, sometimes it can be overwhelming. More and more I have found that my staff are managing not only an email inbox but a Facebook account inbox and checking the personal messages on Twitter. On a few occasions, I have bumped into people and they have said, “Oh, I sent you a message about x or y issue and I haven’t had a response.” I say to them, “Did you email me?” and they say, “No, no. I sent you a message on Facebook,” so I have to go and search for that message and it has perhaps ended up in a different filter.

We can all reflect on the impact that technology has had on our lives. The World Health Organisation declared “gaming disorder” an addictive behaviour disorder in June 2018. It is interesting to note that 28 academics wrote to the WHO, protesting that that was poorly informed by science. That feeds into the point made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West about a lack of research. His proposal to make gaming companies fund a fund that properly funds research is really important. We have to remember that many companies, particularly in Scotland, have developed games and make a significant contribution to the economy, but this is about balance. I was a gamer myself as a kid. I still have my Nintendo and my Sega Master System lying in a dusty heap in my mum’s loft. I remember having those very defined thumbs and playing old games such as California Games, but we have moved on a lot and now so much is on our phones. My four-year-old niece is champing at the bit to get a mobile phone, and her parents are resisting that, but she knows how to use every piece of technology in the house.

We have to face the reality that smartphones and smart technology are part of our everyday lives. The question is how we ensure that there is a balance. The world of play has been diminished by technology. People’s fears about letting their children out have increased, although I am not sure that there is really any more threat than there was when I was a kid and did not have a mobile phone. I would go to the local park and be out for hours, and my mother would phone round all the houses to find out where I was. We are now in a very different world, in which parents can contact their children 24/7. That is good in many respects, but we have to look at the wider issue of childhood obesity and children perhaps not going out to play in the same way as they did before.

The debate has been very interesting. I like the hon. Gentleman’s idea of setting up an all-party parliamentary group. I hope that the tech companies will come and discuss that with him. He made a point about what people see now on social media. It was interesting to see the report from the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It is not getting as good a response from the Government as it should be, and it would be good to hear the Minister address some of the issues around fake news—the issues that we saw during the EU referendum. It would be good to hear those being properly addressed, because there is a real risk as people move away from traditional media outlets, away from newspapers, on to social media. We must ensure that the news and information that people get online and on their social media platforms is absolutely accurate and not fake.

5.6 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing the debate and on making a brilliant opening speech; he set out the issues with clarity and great purpose.

My hon. Friend started with the fact that it is just 10 years since Steve Jobs gave the world the iPhone. I was intrigued to discover, when researching for this debate, that when he introduced that new technology, he made extremely sure that he did not give it to his children. We now face a period in which we will be having this debate with increasing frequency. Statistics that I have seen show that some 40% of people now have some kind of internet-based addiction, whether that involves checking emails, scrolling through Facebook or Twitter, or online gambling. Indeed, figures that I came across this morning show that Generation Z—just slightly younger than yourself, Sir Edward—are now exposed to some 13 hours of media every single day.

We have to recognise that the technology companies that now pervade everyday life will need a very different kind of regulation in the years to come. I was delighted to meet representatives of the Centre for Humane Technology, from the United States, earlier this afternoon. They had a very good analogy. They were looking at various tech scandals around the world and made the point that when we look at those symptoms, they are hurricanes, but the addictive technology at the centre is actually more akin to climate change. What we need to do as a legislature is figure out how to introduce...
a new regulatory regime that will control that climate change. As Tim Berners-Lee said, “social networks—they are manmade. If they are not serving humanity, they can and should be changed.”

Nearly 30% of children who spend more than three hours on social network sites show symptoms of poor mental health; that is compared with just 12% of children who spend no time on social network sites. It is becoming increasingly obvious to all of us that there is some link between the use of social media, the overuse of social media and, frankly, the mental illness epidemic among many of our young people.

We are also beginning to see significant differences in the ways in which people from different income groups relate to social media. I think that it was Ipsos that this week published research showing that children from better-off families use social media for three and a bit hours less than those from poorer families, and of course there are differences in the way it is used.

With regard to the most dangerous end of the spectrum, we have The Telegraph to thank for a very compelling campaign in which it showed how, at its worst, social media and addictive technology are used to hook children on gambling, particularly casino-style gambling, and to engage children in suicide games, such as the Blue Whale challenge, which has been linked to 100 teenage deaths in Russia. It is no surprise that earlier this year 50 psychologists in America wrote an open letter accusing many of their colleagues of unethical behaviour in advising technology companies on the misuse of addictive tech. If we compare that problem, which is becoming increasingly well defined, with the sort of social contract that we expect from social media firms, we start to see a gulf emerge.

I looked at figures for the taxes paid by social media firms, prepared for me by the Library. It is remarkable how much of the big tech firms in this country are paying very low rates of tax—1.5%, 5%, 6% or 10% at best. That is a long way below even our low levels of corporation tax. We are beginning to see with some clarity the externalities—as economists would call them—or pollution that is created by social media firms, and the taxpayer is expected to clear it up. Unless we begin to change the tax regime and the regulatory regime, this problem will become more pronounced.

The Government need to step up to their responsibilities. The Minister’s former boss, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and others have made a splash in the newspapers, wringing their hands in big interviews, but their concern has not made a splash in the newspapers, wringing their hands in big interviews, but their concern has not made an effect, both on the safety of our fellow citizens and on the behaviour of some of these big companies. If the Government do not do it, we parliamentarians will have to update the legislation.

I have three pleas for the Minister. First, she should look closely at the recommendations that have been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and by those on the Labour Front Bench who have called for a duty of care to be placed on social media companies. If I bought a chunk of land, built a stadium and put loads of people in it, I would quite rightly be held to some pretty rigorous health and safety legislation. If I build a virtual forum, where I put loads of people there, there are no obligations on me whatsoever. We need to ensure that there is a duty of care, which is rooted in some tried and tested legislation that goes back to the early 1970s. We need to ensure that the social media firms are understanding and analysing the dangers that their work can pose to their customers. We need them proactively to put in place mechanisms to ameliorate that risk. That needs to be auditable and punishable with significant fines if these firms fall short of their obligations.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich): I am not at all unsympathetic to what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. There is a concern here that social media may be associated with poor mental health if it is overused, but there is a second issue to do with potentially addictive behaviour in gaming and social media use. It is very difficult to put in place mechanisms to fine the international companies responsible, or to make them adhere to good behaviour in recognising the risks.

Liam Byrne: That is an important point. The duty of care framework, which has been tried and tested in case law since the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, is a useful, very British and pragmatic solution to these kinds of problems, because it puts the locus on the company to identify the harm it may cause and then take reasonable steps to prevent it.

I think that it is possible for an individual nation state to take action against these companies. That is what we see with the “NetzDG” law in Germany. One in six Facebook moderators work in Germany, which should not surprise any of us. There is a 650m fine if companies in Germany do not take down hate speech within 24 hours and wipe out all illegal content within seven days. I think it is possible for individual countries to introduce domestic regulations that can have a material effect, both on the safety of our fellow citizens and on the behaviour of some of these big companies. If the Government do not do it, we parliamentarians will have to try to build an international coalition for responsible tech. I hope that my hon. Friend’s all-party parliamentary group can make strides towards not only a cross-party consensus in this Parliament, but brokering an international consensus.

Hannah Bardell: The right hon. Gentleman brings to the debate huge knowledge of the matter. Does he agree that one of the issues with content and responsibility online is pornography? The rise of online pornography has had a huge impact on behaviour, particularly that of young men. I commend to him the book “Misogynation: The True Scale of Sexism” by Laura Bates. I went to the Edinburgh international book festival, where she spoke about the rise of incidents in playgrounds, which schools do not necessarily have the tools to deal with, as well as young men becoming addicted to online porn, which is having an effect on their behaviour towards women. Does he agree that that is a serious issue, which we must work together, across parties, the UK and beyond, to tackle?

Liam Byrne: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have bored the Minister endlessly with this point, but during the 19th century there was not one Factory Act, but 17. As business, technology and marketplaces change, we have to update the legislation.
The Minister knows that if we are to maximise the degree of predictability and certainty for the business world and others, there is a good case for setting out a bill of digital rights for the 21st century. That would include all sorts of useful things, for example enshrining the right to privacy—enshrined in article 8 of the European charter of fundamental rights—and action on algorithmic justice. It could also include some of the initiatives, devices, techniques and legislative approaches, such as the duty of care legislation. I hope that is something that my hon. Friend’s all-party parliamentary group will be able to discuss. If we want a set of principles that can withstand the test of time, and underpin the reform and re-reform of this sector over the course of the 21st century, we will have to work hard to build that cross-party consensus not only in this country, but around the world.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk.

Ged Killen: I am the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

Margot James: What a bad start! I do apologise to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). Of course, I meant to thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West. I share his amazement that it has only been 10 years since the advent of the Apple iPhone. He made an excellent speech, and I identified, as I am sure other hon. Members did, with the examples he gave of the intensity of the relationship that so many of us have with our devices, and how that is—in his view and mine—tipping over to the point where we question whether it is healthy.

The shadow Minister mentioned the Centre for Humane Technology, an excellent organisation, which was founded by scientists and researchers employed by the large social media platforms. One of them, an ethicist working for one of the major platforms, was tasked with trying to bring a more ethical framework to the development of apps and activity on that particular platform. He bowed out with the rather depressing realisation that change was not possible from within and that he would have more effect from outside, so he founded this organisation.

That is a powerful reminder that there is a difficulty in the perceived conflict in companies’ need for more and more of our attention. It really is a competition for attention and, for the companies that get it, the question then is how to keep it. That is the driving force behind the algorithms that are constantly developing and furthering the reach of these platforms into our lives. It is very important that we monitor usage and that we expect more from technology companies in terms of putting right some of the things that are alleged to have gone wrong, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk made the point that although the debate is about addiction, we are also talking more broadly about excessive screen time. There is a scale, running from what might be called a healthy amount of screen time, which might tip over into dependency, over-involvement and straightforward addiction.

Hannah Bardell: Is the Minister aware that some health research has shown that we hold our breath when we are checking our emails and our phones, which denies the brain oxygen?

Margot James: I always learn something new when I am answering debates. I did not know that. I am not sure that I look forward to finding out more about it, but I certainly will.

We are undoubtedly living in an age where mobile devices mean that people feel compelled to be connected at any time. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) clearly made that point when she talked about her desire for some off-screen time in her personal time in the countryside, which proved difficult. We have dwelt on the darker side of those devices and platforms during the debate, because we are talking about addiction, but it is incumbent on us to recognise that a great deal of positivity has come forth from those devices.

We are looking at the impact on children and young people, to whom we have a particular responsibility. Youth policy is one of my Department’s responsibilities, so that is close to our hearts. The chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, is reviewing the impact that internet use can have on children’s mental health. There are no results from that yet, because it was requested only about a month ago by the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who, I am delighted to inform hon. Members, shares the concerns that we have heard and is in a position to do more about them in the Department of Health and Social Care.

Liam Byrne: As the Minister knows, the national health service is under tremendous strain. What arguments is she making to Her Majesty’s Treasury to do something about the low rates of tax paid by those companies, so that there is money to do something about the problem?

Margot James: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, tax is a matter for the Treasury. The Chancellor indicated that he was looking at a digital services tax in his speech a few weeks ago. His first priority is to gain international agreement for the fairer taxation of technology companies, particularly these platforms. Actually, I should retract that; I do not think that he said particularly these platforms, but he did say that he wanted an international agreement for the fairer taxation of technology companies as his first priority. If he does not get that, I am told that he will introduce a tax unilaterally in the United Kingdom.

The health review will cover important and diverse issues, including cyber-bullying, online gaming, sleep problems and problematic internet use. I gather that the chief medical officer’s report will be published next year, and I will try to get a handle on when within that 12-month period we can expect it.

The Department of Health and Social Care has also reviewed evidence on the impact that social media can have on children, which showed that those who spend more than three hours using social media on school days are twice as likely to report high or very high scores for mental ill-health. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) said that he had seen research showing a socio-economic difference in the amount of screen time, which, along with the research I have mentioned about some sort of causal link in the
time spent, shows that digital technology is in danger of widening the social gaps in society, although it has the potential to bring people together. We obviously need to work to ensure that the latter prevails. The Government have made children and young people’s mental health a top priority for the NHS, and a major programme to improve access to specialist services is supported by £1.4 billion of new funding.

We are also looking at the use of smartphones in schools, which I know inspires strong passions. I have seen some initial results from that analysis, and most schools have rules in place that require that smartphones are not visible during school hours. We need to see more research on whether that is universally applied.

The Government believe that schools are best placed to make decisions about how best to use technology. Headteachers are empowered to manage mobile phone usage. Many schools and parents would appreciate more guidance, however, which we are working on across Government, inspired by the commission of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to the chief medical officer to advise on the mental health impact of social media and smartphone usage.

On internet safety in the wider sense, the overuse of technology and concerns about online harms are not limited to young people. Our forthcoming joint Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Home Office White Paper will be published in the winter. It will set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures and will detail how we propose to tackle online harms. It will set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep citizens safer.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill asked whether we would look to place a duty of care on social media platforms. That route is certainly worthy of consideration. It is a proven method in other areas, and we will look at its relevance to the online world. Working with the Department of Health and Social Care and across Government, we will develop proposals targeted at improving the ability of users. We are also reforming the UK council for child internet safety so as a cause. The strategy includes how Government can set a framework to enable local authorities, the third sector and businesses to support people’s social health.

Research suggests that the reality of social media and its connection to people’s relationships is nuanced and that how negative or positive the impact is depends on which social media service is being used and whether it is substituting for or complementing real-life interactions. For example, there are applications that help new mothers to stay more connected through difficult early stages of parenthood and products that use artificial intelligence to provide real-life experiences for those unable to leave their homes. If used correctly, the technology has real potential to break down barriers and improve the situation that isolated people might be exposed to. That is why social media companies are a core part of initiatives to tackle isolation. Digital means of bringing people together can be especially important to people with mobility problems and families separated by distance.

Technology can be and largely is a powerful force for good. It serves humanity, spreads ideas, and enhances freedom and opportunity across the world. However, what we have heard today gives us great pause for thought. It is informing our deliberations on online safety and I look forward to the continued debate with colleagues here in this Chamber and beyond as we develop our White Paper. We look forward to hearing their further thoughts on the various actions that we might take.

5.31 pm

Ged Killen: I see that the Division bells have just rung, and I know that proceedings are running late, so I do not intend to use my full time this afternoon.

We have had an excellent debate and I have learned a lot of new things, particularly from the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) about my breathing and using technology, which I look forward to looking into further, and from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who has given me much to think about in my new APPG. I thank the Minister for coming here today. There is a lot of agreement on this issue and I look forward to working with her and other Members on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered addictive technology.

5.31 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 October 2018

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

School Funding

9.30 am

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered school funding.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I wanted to keep the title of the debate broad because school funding does not have the same impact in all areas. We must continue to ensure that all our children get an excellent education regardless of where they live, and that all our schools have the money in place to provide that.

I am sure that hon. Members welcome the record levels of funding going to our schools. The simple facts tell us that, overall, more money is being spent, and that is a good thing, but schools are not feeling the effects of that increase. We must differentiate between the schools budget and the teaching budget: more money is being spent on education, but that does not necessarily filter its way down to the experience for all pupils and teachers.

Last month I met local headteachers and parents as part of a Fair Funding For All Schools campaign that has been going up and down the country, which colleagues may have seen. The overall view of the group was that we need more resources in our schools budget, but they were disappointed by the line repeated by the Government that more money than ever is going into our schools. We must continue to ensure that all our schools have the money in place to provide that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way—I suspect that I will be one of many to intervene. I have done a survey of headteachers in Coventry. Headteachers tell me that they have a number of funding problems. For example, in Coventry they have probably lost something like £295 per pupil over the past seven years. I acknowledge that the Government have put £1.5 billion back in, but they also have a shortfall of about £3 billion from cuts some years ago. Does she agree—I doubt she will—that one of the big problems is the need for specialist teachers for children with special needs?

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman is pre-empting my speech; I will deal with special educational needs because they are of great concern.

If the Minister meets headteachers in Coventry or in my constituency, they may well tell him that the reality is that the current budget is not enough. Sian Kilpatrick of Bernards Heath Junior School told me that recently she wrote to parents to explain the financial squeeze that her school faces. Mrs Kilpatrick compiled a helpful list of all the additional things that she has to allocate funding to in order to keep her school running—I will not go through them all, but I am happy to share the list with the Minister. The things she outlined include: outdoor vital risk assessments, legal human resources advice, general maintenance costs and staff insurance payments. Those are just some of the additional costs that schools have to find money for. On top of that, she had to pay £8,000 to get her trees pruned.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Surely one of the problems is that different campaign groups, and indeed the Department for Education, use headline figures that vary from organisation to organisation. In working together to achieve a solution to the problem, it is not particularly helpful for words such as “deceptive” and “dishonest” to be used by one campaign against another or against the Department. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be a much firmer grip on the use of language by the campaign groups?

Mrs Main: I cannot comment on the campaign groups; I am commenting on what the headteachers in St Albans said, and no one used the words “deceptive” or “dishonest.” The purpose of my being here today is to ensure that there is a degree of clarity about where the funding goes. The headline is that we are putting more into schools—and we are—but the reality on the ground is that teachers face undue pressures. I want to highlight that. I cannot accept anyone’s use of inappropriate language—that is not fair on either side of the argument. We must be respectful of the pressures faced by the schools and by the Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, will meet in half an hour to discuss education issues in Northern Ireland—to be fair, they are not the Minister’s responsibility. In Northern Ireland, teachers, schools and boards of governors have to decide whether to pay for a teacher or to increase class sizes, thereby affecting the quality of education. Are those the sorts of decisions being made in the hon. Lady’s constituency, as they are in mine?

Mrs Main: My teachers did not exactly raise class sizes, although it was covered in the round that that was a problem. They raised the problem of not being able to refurbish toilets, pay for much-needed decoration or replace outdated PCs in their IT suites.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that the picture varies, but the signs indicate that schools are not benefiting universally, as we would wish them to, from the new funding formula. Many schools I have spoken to have reiterated that the national funding formula must cover the funding needed for schools, not just the pupil-led aspect. Pupils and parents expect those schools to be fit for purpose as well as to provide lessons. We must address the concerns raised by teachers; we must not hide behind any basic facts of a rise in per-pupil funding. We must look at this issue in the round.

The Minister said that he is in listening mode. I hope that the Government will look carefully at parents’ requests to direct money to special educational needs, as the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) outlined. The Department for Education reports that we have upwards of 1 million pupils with special educational needs in our school—a number that has risen significantly in recent years and is 14% of school pupils. I welcome the news that the Government have committed to improve funding for SEN pupils and that a further £1 billion has been put into this fund since 2013. Those are good things, but we must look at whether they are sufficient.
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. There is an anomaly that schools that accept pupils from poorer backgrounds are rewarded and encouraged by the pupil premium that those schools attract for taking those children, but for children with additional or special needs the first 11 hours of the education, health and care plans are funded by the local school, which often places a financial burden on it. There is therefore a disincentive for schools to take on children from those backgrounds who have additional special needs.

Mrs Main: I completely agree. I will touch on that issue later in my speech. Links Academy in St Albans says that it is mopping up the very pupils that the hon. Gentleman says are being cold shouldered or refused positions elsewhere.

The National Association of Head Teachers carried out a survey on SEN funding, and a mere 2% of those surveyed said that the top-up funding received was sufficient to meet the growing needs of SEN pupils. That was recognised by both teachers and parents in St Albans. Inevitably, that will have an impact on the way that schools look after SEN pupils. Department for Education figures say we have 2,800 fewer teaching assistants and 2,600 fewer support staff in our schools. That puts even more pressure on teachers and can be especially challenging for teachers dealing with SEN pupils. The increased amount of money paid to some of those who are lower paid and work as assistants or support staff was welcome, but it puts an additional pressure on school resources. We welcome the additional funds for people paid lower wages but we must recognise the true impact.

To return to the remarks of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), I have been in contact with David Allen, headmaster of Links Academy, which I recently visited, and he welcomes pupils with special needs. He described his despair at the rising number of SEN pupils being permanently excluded from mainstream schools. In fact, I was due to meet him there on Thursday with parents and the SEN group, but as soon as the SEN group heard that I was coming, it said it would pull out. Unfortunately, I have had to pull out in order to ensure a fair hearing for the pupil in that said it would pull out. I have heard parents say that when they contact a mainstream school that has places—that is what the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to—but inform it that their child has a special educational need, they suddenly find that the place is no longer available. That is a primary concern for teachers, and I hope that the Minister will set out his plans to secure and correctly direct SEN teaching resources, which are absolutely needed.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Has the hon. Lady heard from her local schools, as I have, that one of the barriers to getting a statement in the first place is the severe underfunding of child and adolescent mental health services? Is it necessary to go through CAMHS to secure an EHCP. The referral time used to be six months, which frankly is a long time in a young child’s life, but in Oxfordshire it now averages two years.

Mrs Main: If the hon. Lady secured a debate on CAMHS, I would attend it. I can testify that many parents in my constituency experience issues with CAMHS.

Staff and staffing costs are under severe pressure. Schools cite increased staffing costs, and the amount of their budget that those costs take up, as their main concern. WorthLess? surveyed headteachers as part of its fairer funding campaign and found that 60% had had to reduce their staff by one or more to balance their budget. That goes back to the pressures I mentioned.

Sandringham School in my constituency, which hosted the public meeting I attended—it was quite a rocky meeting, but I said I would bring back people’s concerns—explained to me its issues with staff pay rises, national insurance and pension contributions, and teacher recruitment shortfalls. Many schools across the country are grappling with those four key issues. In an area such as mine, where house prices and the cost of living are very high, wages sometimes just cannot keep up so that teachers are able to live in the constituency and work in its schools.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Although I welcome the extra £3.5 million per annum for North East Hampshire’s schools as a result of funding adjustments, there is still a big divergence in per-pupil funding across the country. That is entirely in line with her point about the cost of staffing, which has no relationship with per-pupil funding, given the high
cost of living in Hampshire and elsewhere. Does she agree that it is important that future funding formulas take proper account of the cost of living?

**Mrs Main:** As a former teacher, I know that there are teachers who argue vociferously for universal pay standards across the country and dispute the need for pay to reflect local house prices and so on. That is a debate for another day. However, teachers in my area say—this is awful, but I accept it—that when a valued, top-of-the-range headteacher or head of department goes, there can be a small, collective sigh of relief in the budget department because that means the school can take on a younger, less experienced teacher on a lower pay scale and the budget suddenly becomes a little looser.

It is demoralising for a school not to be able to reward and keep high-value staff because it simply does not have the money to pay them. I am experiencing that cycle in St Albans, where staff are hard to retain. Although it is great to have bright young things—I was one of those once—coming through the door, with all the enthusiasm they bring to teaching, there is nothing like an experienced head of department.

There is widespread unhappiness about the handling of the recent teacher pay rise announcement. The key problem is that schools themselves have to fund the first 1% of that pay rise, which we so generously allocated them but did not provide additional funding to support them with. Declan Linnane, the head of Nichols Breakspear School in St Albans, told me that that 1% alone will cost his school £30,000—money it will have to find from yet further efficiency savings or another member of staff in already difficult times.

With rising national insurance contributions and an impending increase in employer pension contributions, schools are under huge pressure to find more savings at the cost of our pupils’ education. Increasing staffing costs have a huge impact on schools’ budgets. Removing the need for schools to fund the first 1% of pay increases themselves would be welcome. I wonder whether the Minister is in a generous mood and would like to make a grab on the Chancellor’s Budget.

Schools are interested in the Government’s proposal to create a central staffing database to reduce agency fees. Agency staff are a big issue for many schools, which often cannot retain staff and are obliged to use agency staff as cover; or run their staff so tightly that there is no slack in the system if a staff member goes ill, for example. I would be grateful if the Minister updated me on that database and when headteachers should expect it to be available.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, which reported last month on education funding in England, found that per-pupil school spending has fallen by 8% in real terms since 2010. That must be considered alongside the fact that, according to the DFE’s own figures, half a million more pupils are in our schools now than in 2010. The IFS also reported that school sixth forms have endured a 21% reduction in per-pupil spending since 2011, and it estimates that by 2019-20 spending per sixth-form pupil will be lower than at any point since 2002.

Those are worrying statistics, which address many of the real concerns of teachers and parents in St Albans. We must aim for funding that meets the needs of schools across the country—as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) said, certain parts of the country are really struggling—and allows them to deliver excellent teaching that inspires pupils to succeed in life.

Worryingly, we have also heard reports of schools having to use the pupil premium to fund their core budget. A recent poll of headteachers found that 70% had dipped into the pupil premium to prop up their core budget. That is borne out in St Albans, where we are aware that happens. It should be of real concern that a fund designed to help students from the most disadvantaged families has to be used for overall school spending. That cannot be right.

Schools are also concerned about their lack of ability to plan their finances. With the NFF being introduced over a number of years and uncertainty about how it will affect individual schools, headteachers are unwilling to commit to long-term planning. That was reflected in a poll of headteachers, which found that 90% feel the NFF has given them no long-term financial certainty and has resulted in no “meaningful financial planning” being carried out beyond year 1.

I do not just take things at face value. Trading statistics is never good, as I said at the public meeting I mentioned. I believe in listening to what teachers say, and they say they are struggling to do long-term planning under the current system. They need longer-term certainty about their budgets.

**Tim Farron:** Does the hon. Lady agree that the problem with long-term planning and wriggle room in budgets is even greater for smaller schools? In constituencies such as mine there are lots of very small, very good schools of 30 children or even fewer. If a large school has a bad period in which it has an issue with leadership, a poor Ofsted report or whatever, it can absorb the effect of getting fewer pupils as a consequence and still be able to plan ahead. However, that could be curtains for a small school, which would mean a community losing its school for good.

**Mrs Main:** I do not have experience of that, but I recognise the picture the hon. Gentleman paints. It is vital that we address those concerns about funding.

The UK tax burden is at a 50-year high, so the Minister will be pleased to hear that I do not propose additional tax rises. We are at the limit of how much tax we can reasonably ask ordinary people to pay. Working families have felt the squeeze since 2010 as the Government have tried to tackle the enormous financial burden we found ourselves with. It is good that we have made progress. Far be it from me to tell the Chancellor how to do his job, but the Budget is looming, so I am going to put my thoughts on the record. I am certain that the Government can find the money if we prioritise our spending appropriately.

We had a manifesto commitment—the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale will probably profoundly disagree with me about this—to scrap universal free school meals for reception, year 1 and year 2 pupils, but it was dropped. That was misguided. I and some of the teachers who were at the meeting I mentioned think we should have investigated that further. Thankfully, in St Albans only around 6% of pupils are entitled to free school meals. In Hertfordshire overall that figure is about 8%. Perversely, that means we subsidise between...
9.52 am

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Six hon. Members want to speak in the debate, and we have to start the winding-up speeches at 20 minutes to 11. That gives us about 50 minutes, so Members have about eight minutes each, maximum.

9.52 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who I congratulate on securing the debate. For the first 19 minutes of her speech she sounded as if she was reading a Labour party brief, and I was about to get out a membership form to pass across to her. It was just the last two minutes that spoiled it slightly, and I am afraid as a result I cannot pass the form across after all. I certainly recognise her analysis of some of the problems that affect our schools’ finances.

I am the only London Member present, so if Members will forgive me, I shall dwell predominantly, parochially, on my own borough and mention at least one issue that affects London schools in particular. The one thing missing from the analysis given by the hon. Member for St Albans—if I may gently chide her—was consideration of the impact of cuts in general local authority funding. As a result of those cuts, most of the support that used to be available from local authorities to help schools in difficult circumstances is no longer there. Schools have had to find their own solutions—some with considerable success and others with less. That is part of the backdrop that we need to consider.

I am privileged to represent schools that, according to independent analysis by the Education Policy Institute, are in the borough that provides the best education in the country—from starting school to leaving school. The increase in achievement is, apparently, best in Harrow, according to the institute. I give particular credit to the teachers, parents and leadership of my borough’s schools, and as a former teacher I recognise the huge contribution to the country that teachers and other professionals in schools make. I want to highlight the pressures that schools in my constituency face. I should acknowledge the generous offer of the Minister for School Standards, who is responding to the debate, to receive a delegation of headteachers from Harrow. We are in the process of organising that. I hope to persuade him not only to meet the delegation but to come to Harrow to see one or two schools in my constituency that face particularly challenging circumstances.

The average annual cost implication of the financial pressures on schools in my constituency—for the current 12 months, compared with the previous 12 months—is more than £203,000 for a secondary school and more than £70,000 of additional net costs for a primary school. That comes from the increase in non-teaching pay awards, non-teaching pensions, the apprenticeship levy, the estimated likely increase in teaching pay awards and other aspects of the incremental costs that come with teachers’ pay rises. It does not include any increase in the cost of pensions. There are pay pressures as the result of rises in utility costs and there is reduced income, in particular for primary schools, which are experiencing annual reductions, related to pupils in receipt of pupil premium grant, of on average £10,000. I have described average pressures, with an assumption that average school budgets are cash flat, but in Harrow some 25% of schools that are currently protected by the minimum funding guarantee expect to lose roughly 1.5% of their pupil budget per annum, as a result of the way that the minimum funding guarantee works. That could equate to a cash reduction of a further £20,000 to £30,000 per annum.

For a primary school, losing £70,000 a year equates on average to the cost of one to two teachers. For a secondary school, an average loss of £200,000 is the equivalent of four teachers. As the hon. Lady said, school headteachers and governors are trying to find ways to protect the experienced teachers who add the most value to a child’s education, but experienced teachers who go are often replaced by a newly qualified teacher. Many of those are paid less than £25,000. Lady said she once was, bright young things. They are enthusiastic and skilled and have a huge contribution to make, but they do not have the same experience, and that is a significant
problem. Alternatively, teaching assistants can be lost, as is happening in my constituency. That has a particular impact on those with special educational needs, and there is a knock-on effect on other young people in those classes.

The hon. Lady rightly dwelt on the funding crisis for special educational needs. There has been some helpful media coverage of that, of late. I understand that roughly half of London boroughs face significant shortfalls in funding. They are overspending on SEN budgets, such has been the growth in the pressures. That is partly caused by some helpful changes in connection with the conclusion of the SEN funding review, leading to an increase in the number of post-16 and post-19 SEN children deemed eligible for funding, as well as general demographic growth and the fact that the formula for SEN is currently based on historical data on children aged five to 15, and does not reflect the post-19 inclusion.

Another particularly helpful aspect of the hon. Lady’s speech was the reference to sixth form provision. There has been an 8% real-terms cut for every school, as concluded by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, but the 21% cut affecting sixth forms is a particular pressure for St Dominic’s Sixth Form College in my constituency. While I hope that there will be a general funding increase for education, I hope that Ministers will look particularly at sixth forms in that respect.

Lastly, I ask the Minister to come to Grange Farm or Norbury Primary Schools in my constituency. Their headteachers are remarkable individuals who are hugely passionate and determined to do what they can for their children. Nevertheless, given the housing crisis in London, the number of pupils who move on a regular basis, and the scale of the diversity challenge, financial pressures are adding to the general problems facing those schools, and I would be keen to host the Minister on a visit to Harrow to improve his education on the school funding crisis.

10 am

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing this important debate, but there is a sense of déjà vu. Over the past few years I have participated in many debates in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber on school funding, and two years ago there was a debate specifically on school funding in West Sussex, which is what I will concentrate on today. As my hon. Friend said, progress has been made with the new funding formula, but for many of us that is just work in progress. It was a move in the right direction, but it has not yet reached the destination of genuinely fair funding.

West Sussex was able to secure an additional £29.8 million funding as part of the £1.3 billion that the Government added last year, but that must been seen in the context of pupil numbers that are up substantially and the funding pressures coming down the line, such as teachers’ pay, national insurance and the other points raised by my hon. Friend. Friend. We will all plead the case for our own areas, but West Sussex has consistently been at the bottom of the table. We were the second to lowest funded local authority in the country, and with the additional money we have now gone to being the eighth lowest funded per unit for primary schools, and the sixth lowest for secondary funding. We have gone from being at the bottom of the lowest decile to nearer the top of the lowest decile. There is still a long way to go, as the Minister will be only too aware, given that he, too, represents a West Sussex constituency.

There is great confusion about what has happened to funding in real terms. Many figures have been bandied around, with banners outside schools saying that West Sussex has lost x millions of pounds. Because of the funding formula and the complications of how the deprivation, prior attainment and rural sparsity factors work, we need greater clarity on exactly what we are getting and where the money is going.

**Layla Moran:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that no one on the frontline is arguing that more money is coming into the coffers of local schools?

**Tim Loughton:** Everybody is arguing that more money is coming into the coffers of local schools—that is plainly a fact. It is a question of how many pupils that money has to be spread across, increasing pressures on that funding, and what is left over to fund the basic education of children. It is no good saying that less money is going into schools; it is not. It is just not enough, given all those other factors.

In West Sussex we have the cumulative effect over many years of consistently being right at the bottom of the heap, so that all those savings have been used up years ago and many of my schools are running on empty. Despite that, many schools in my constituency are doing an outstanding job, such as Eastbrook Primary Academy in Southwick, St Nicolas and St Mary Primary in Shoreham, Shoreham Academy, Sompting Village School in Sompting, and Vale School in Worthing, to name just a few schools that have been consistently outstanding and good, despite all those factors. They are a mix of academies, faith schools and local authority schools—I give preference to no particular type of school, and indeed we have no free schools in my constituency. As has been said, there is a particular problem with special needs schools that are not covered by the new fair funding formula, although the numbers of pupils coming forward with severe educational needs has increased. Fantastic schools such as Herons Dale School in Shoreham are suffering huge pressures, and we are seeing the effect on pupils.

I want to concentrate on real examples, not just talk in the round. Last year I invited every head of every school in my constituency to a couple of roundtables to tell me exactly what was going on in their schools—it was not about fears of what might happen, but about what was going on and how they set their budgets there and then. This year I repeated that exercise with the chairs of governors from all schools in my constituency. As a result of those findings, I wrote a lengthy letter to the Education Secretary—I have just had a reply from the Minister—in which I gave real life examples.

There were many common factors, and in the consultation on the fair funding formula, 9% of 25,222 responses that the Department for Education received came from West Sussex. That hugely disproportionate figure shows how important this issue is in our part of the world. Common issues were that staffing costs, in some cases, were 90% of a school’s budget. Some years ago they would typically have been nearer 80%, and beyond that figure it becomes unsustainable
for many schools. There have been many redundancies and fewer working hours, and non-returning maternity leave cases are commonplace. Senior leadership teams are covering classes to remove the need for supply teachers, and extracurricular activities and trips are being cut due to cost. Infrastructure investment and development is being delayed or ruled out completely.

Let me give a few examples from schools. One medium-sized primary school has reduced teaching assistant support by more than 200 hours and has not replaced its inclusion co-ordinator. It is unable to replace ageing and antiquated IT equipment. A junior school now has a deficit of £40,000, and will require an additional £220,000 for salaries over the next few years. Class sizes are typically 32 or 33 since 113 more pupils came into the school, yet there was an equivalent increase in full-time teachers of 0.8%. Schools are not losing funds because they are losing pupils; they are attracting pupils and yet they do not have the funds to get the teaching cover they need. The professional development budget was between £3,000 and £5,000, but it is now zero. The extended curriculum budget was around £20,000, but it is now £500. The learning resources budget was £120,000, and is now £35,000. There will be a deficit, and in that school 87% of expenditure is on staff salaries and overtime.

In a medium-sized primary school, non-qualified teachers such as high-level teaching assistants are being used to cover classes so that the school cuts the cost of supply staff, and numerous cuts to teaching assistant posts are creating greater workloads for teachers. Schools are unable to pay overtime. Counselling levels have fallen due to cutbacks, and that will be a soft target for further cuts in future. That is a particularly big worry to me because it will create greater pressures on those pupils who require greater attention and resources. They will then fall further behind at school, and they will not get the opportunity to make that time up if we do not deal with the issue soon. In too many cases the waiting list for counselling in school or beyond is many months, and during that time a condition can fester. I have many more practical examples. That is not scaremongering; this is going on now, and this is how governors and heads have to set their budgets to effect those constraints.

What can we do? I have three suggestions. First, the Minister absolutely must lobby as part of the comprehensive spending review and say that the shortfall in funding is a false economy in the extreme. Secondly, it was disappointing that the full teachers’ pay was not covered centrally—just the additional pay over that 1%, and there have been questions about some teachers not getting that full coverage over the 1%. Finally, I suggest that West Sussex, and other coastal areas where there are particular problems of deprivation and high costs, should have something like a coastal communities challenge fund, just as the London Challenge fund in 2003 addressed some of the difficulties in places where affluent areas mask areas of real deprivation, such as those found typically on the south coast, the Kent coast and other parts of the country. I ask the Government to look seriously at addressing the serious deficit in parts of the country such as West Sussex, because we are feeling the effects of it now.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this timely debate.

For some years, school funding in Devon has been a growing concern, expressed on a cross-party basis. My area in the far south-west is a true representation of the wider picture in Devon of not getting our fair share of resources. Last Friday I held my monthly “Politics and Pastries” roundtable, where I fed pastries to some of our hard-working headteachers and got information out of them about the state of education in Plymouth. They listed as their top concerns the pressure on finances, the lack of support for mental health and the urgent need to fund the Plymouth Challenge.

As the proud son of a teacher, I know how hard teachers work. Each of them is full of love for their profession, their students and the subjects they teach, but it is fair to say that at the moment our education system is being held together by good will. I thank Plymouth’s teachers, teaching assistants, support staff, other professionals and volunteers for all they do, but all too often their spark is being put out. Too many are left frustrated and demoralised by the double whammy of a lack of support and an increase in pressure to do more with less.

My argument today is a simple one: every child matters. All children, whether from the north, the south, the east or the west, from London or Plymouth, should be valued equally and have a fair slice of the funding cake. That children in one part of the country should be valued the same as those in another is surely a principle that we can all agree on, but schools across Plymouth have suffered consistent underfunding, especially since 2010. Plymouth has one of the lowest education spends per head in the United Kingdom. Each of our children, on average, is valued £415 less than a child in a London postcode, and £300 less than the national average. A Plymouth child is not worth any less than any other child anywhere else in the country, and the value for their education should reflect that and not treat them as being worth less.

Cuts have consequences; the shortfall has had a damaging impact on students in Plymouth, who continue to fall behind the national average in academic performance. That is not because our teachers are not working hard enough, but simply because the resources are not there to give those children the educational excellence they deserve under fair funding. Plymouth schools face a vicious circle of cuts and increased costs that worsen existing conditions. Class sizes have increased and the numbers of teachers and teaching assistants have decreased. It is worth remembering that some of the poorest and most vulnerable students in our communities are increasingly in the most underfunded schools.

The contrast is clear when we compare Plymouth with London. In the capital, nine out of 10 children go to a good or outstanding school, while in Plymouth only live in 10 children do so. If every child matters, why is it that children in the far south-west are worth less than those in other parts of the country? Why are schoolkids in Plymouth not being given a fair chance to succeed?

I have three simple asks for the Minister, to help our teachers and to stop our children falling behind. First, I would like him to consider reviewing and removing the
3% maximum gains cap that is part of the national funding formula. One of the key principles of the national funding formula consultation was that pupils with similar characteristics should attract similar levels of funding wherever they are in the country. That is a good thing, but the maximum gains cap prevents schools that have been underfunded for many years from receiving their fair share of their current funding entitlement.

To give an example, under the new funding formula, Plymouth is due to gain £10.6 million, but the maximum gains cap means that in practice schools in Plymouth will receive less than half that amount, £4.7 million, in 2018-19 and £8.7 million in 2019-20—less than they should be getting under the funding formula because of the gains cap. Even with that additional funding formula, Plymouth will continue to receive considerably less than the national average, so I would be grateful if the Minister reviewed whether the gains cap is appropriate for where we are and whether it could be flexed or removed to give places such as Plymouth that have received lower levels of funding a chance to catch up.

Secondly, I would be grateful if the Minister looked again at funding for mental health support for our schools. It has been mentioned a number of times, but wrap-around support for young people is especially important if they are to achieve their full potential. Plymouth schools are currently sharing a three-year mental health funding deal, but that money runs out this year and headteachers have told me there is no money to replace that funding when it expires. We know that mental health concerns are rising among our young people, with a combination of increasing pressure, social media, bullying and, sadly, for far too many of our children, the additional pressure of caring responsibilities as young carers. Mental health funding is not only an essential part of educational support, but vital if they are to achieve their potential.

Our teachers are brilliant, but they cannot also be mental health workers and professionals. We have seen cuts to mental health provision for young people in primaries, especially with the Plymouth Excellence Cluster—a body that pooled mental health funding for schools—losing its funding earlier this year. The three-year funding deal for secondaries is now due to expire this year. It cannot be right, and I would be grateful if the Minister gave urgent consideration to providing support, especially for young people who are receiving support at the moment and may lose it if money cannot be found within school budgets to replace that provision.

Finally, I ask the Minister to support the Plymouth Challenge. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned, the challenge opportunities are incredible for coastal communities that have lost out on funding. Plymouth, unfortunately, was not deemed to be one of the Government’s opportunity areas, and so missed out on the social mobility package of funding that was recently announced, but Plymouth City Council, working with the Plymouth Education Board in partnership with the regional schools commissioner and officials at the Department for Education, has come up with the Plymouth Challenge, which aims to work with schools in Plymouth and the far south-west to raise standards, promoting leadership and aspiration.

There have been successful challenges right across the country, most notably in London but also elsewhere. In each case, standards and teaching quality have been driven up by considerable and focused investment of time, energy and money in our teachers and schools. In Plymouth we have the will and the passion, but we lack the funding and the time to make that work. There must be deep learning for our teachers—not simply one hour swapped out of a classroom for a quick update on skills, but deep learning, so our teachers and teaching assistants can receive the benefit of the latest in teaching quality initiatives—and the children who would otherwise have been taught by those teachers must have a high-quality replacement, ensuring that their education does not suffer because their teacher is being given additional training.

Plymouth City Council estimates that it requires between £900,000 and £1.3 million to implement the first phase of the scheme. It is supported by schools across the city, and I would be grateful if the Minister looked positively at the Plymouth Challenge and agreed to meet a cross-party delegation of teachers and political representatives from Plymouth at both national and local level, to look at how the DFE can support Plymouth in funding the Plymouth Challenge and ensuring that we can support our own teachers to do the best they can.

Those are three small asks for the Minister, but they would make a huge difference to Plymouth kids and their schools. Plymouth is unique, due to the diversity of our education provision; we have a school of every kind that every Government since 1945 ever thought of. It is not the range of schools that is the problem, but the lack of funding, and I would be grateful if the Minister met us to discuss that.

10.17 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate, which is vital for most children in our country.

Every child deserves an equal opportunity to get on in life, with the same access to high-quality education as their peers, wherever they are in the country. I am proud that Chichester exceeds the national average for attainment at key stage 4 and A-level, as a result of the hard work and dedication of teachers from early years through to secondary schooling.

Spending on our children’s education has never been higher and the new national funding formula is a welcome step toward rebalancing some of the disparities in the old system, where there were over 100 different models across the country. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, however, West Sussex historically suffers from being one of the lowest funded authorities. It is currently the sixth lowest recipient of secondary school funding in the country, and eighth lowest for primary school funding.

I am pleased that under the new funding formula, Chichester schools are to receive an additional £1.2 million in baseline funding for 2018-19—a welcome step toward ensuring that our schools are given the resources they need to help and support every pupil. However, speaking to teachers across my constituency, there is concern that the positive impact of the increased funding will not be felt in the classroom, simply because operating costs in the form of salaries, pensions and apprenticeships, to name but a few elements, have increased. All the additional moneys are being used to service those additional costs.
[Gillian Keegan]

There is much innovation across the sector to reduce expenditure and share costs. One example is executive headships. A headteacher's salary is one of the largest expenditure and share costs. One example is executive headships. A headteacher's salary is one of the largest costs faced by schools, particularly small rural primaries, such as those in my constituency. Last term, two rural schools came under the leadership of one head, ultimately saving money. Those schools are just a 10-minute drive from each other, so the arrangement works. The headteacher now divides his time between the sites and is doing a brilliant job of improving Rogate Primary School, just as he did with Rake Primary School. The money saved will go towards additional resources to aid the children's educational experiences. Of course, such a move comes with strains, particularly because of the close relationships that teachers and staff form with parents and pupils in small villages such as Rake and Rogate. It takes time to build those, and I pay tribute to the commitment shown by headteacher David Bertwistle in that venture.

Rural schools play a vital role in their communities—perhaps even more so than in larger, urban centres. They are the centre of a community and are often the frontline offering social and mental health support to pupils and their families. The reduction of base funding from £150,000 to £110,000 leaves a £40,000 hole in the budgets of small rural primary schools that cannot easily be filled with additional pupils. Additional pupils will come within a natural catchment area, and schools are not in control of those numbers. It is important that the Government funding formula understands the additional pressures facing rural schools and ensures that the level of funding for which they are eligible through the sparsity grant reflects the uniqueness of their place in our communities.

The number of pupils with special educational needs in West Sussex is well above the national average, with 13.5% of all pupils recorded as needing SEN support, compared with the national average of 11.6%. The number of referrals for education, health, and care plans has risen by 43% over the past three years. Although those plans are a much-needed device to ensure that children with special educational needs are given the support that they need, personalised support, we must ensure that the Government are equally adaptable when it comes to tailoring the new higher needs formula to authorities with very high numbers of pupils with special needs.

Let me give an example. I have a constituent who is fighting for her daughter to attend a specialist school equipped to provide the 24-hour care that she needs that is halfway across the country, as she fears that the SEN provision in West Sussex is just not adequate. We need investment in the right provision in West Sussex.

I do understand that the formula is designed to provide more resources for areas with higher levels of deprivation and lower prior attainment. I recently visited schools in Knowsley, where I went to school, and I know that the extra funds are essential to those schools, where 70% of the children are on free school meals and almost half the children are looked after by foster parents or grandparents. Those schools face additional challenges in terms of attracting and retaining the best teachers, but there are additional needs in West Sussex, too. The challenges of rural primary schools and pupil numbers and the unanticipated rise in special educational needs are putting severe pressure on some school budgets. Of course more is being spent on education than ever, but we have increased costs, higher numbers of pupils and more children getting the support they need for their special educational needs.

School standards have been transformed. When I go into my local schools, I am constantly struck by how much better the provision is now than when I went to school, but we should expect the best. We are living in an increasingly competitive world—one that is global and without borders. Providing our children with the best education that we can is vital to their future.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank all hon. Members for their co-operation so far. There is eight minutes each for the two remaining Back-Bench speakers; the winding-up speeches will start at 20 minutes to 11.

10.23 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Here we are again, talking about school funding. It feels to me, as education spokesperson for my party, that it is all I have had a chance to speak about since being elected and taking this post. There is more to a school than just its funding. The problem is that the funding crisis started badly and, over the past two years in particular, it has got worse and worse, to the point that it is now the top concern of both parents and teachers when they contact me. It used to be other things, such as Ofsted and exams, when people were focusing on the curriculum. The debate about school funding has meant that the life has been sucked out of the broader debate and the vision that we should have for education in this country.

As many people here know, I used to be a teacher, but I continue to be a governor of a local school, Botley Primary School. That is important so that I can see with my own eyes the funding pressures on schools. I absolutely agree with the examples given by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and thank him for his helpful contribution to today’s debate.

The point is that these are not theoretical cuts, which could happen. We sometimes look at the headline figures and forget the effect that they have on the frontline. I also very much thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing this important debate. Although sometimes it feels as though we are in “Groundhog Day”, the most important thing we can ever do is provide a good education for the next generation in this country.

I would like to talk about numbers. As many people know, I was a maths teacher, and I have to say that I was disappointed—to use a teacher’s phrase—when it was uncovered that the Government’s claim that we are spending the third highest amount on education of any country in the OECD was pulled up by the UK Statistics Authority as not true, because the number included contributions by private schools and student loans. When the Government talk about how much “we” spend, any ordinary person outside the House—our constituents—would think that they are talking about public spending, and that it does not include money spent on top of that by those parents who want to send their children to private schools.
When I toured the schools in my constituency during the recess, as I am sure many other hon. Members did, the private schools themselves were appalled that they were being used in that way, because there is solidarity among members of the teaching profession, whether in private or state schools. The feeling was that the numbers were being conflated in that way to hide the fact that the UK is not third but 14th, which is rather different. The UK Statistics Authority therefore expressed its serious concerns, and it was also disappointing that the Secretary of State wrote to us all essentially to defend the claim.

The issue was about not just those numbers, but numbers about reading attainment. The statistic that more children than ever go to good or outstanding schools is not the full picture either, because it does not quite take into account the inflation in the numbers of students—the population increase—or the fact that, as we explored in the Public Accounts Committee, large numbers of outstanding schools have not been inspected for the best part of 10 years, so whether they continue to be outstanding is up for debate.

Sir David Norgrove, chair of the UKSFA, went on to say:

"I am sure you”—

this was to the Department—

"share my concerns that instances such as these do not help to promote trust and confidence in official data, and indeed risk undermining them."

Therefore, my first ask of the Minister today is simply this: can he give this guarantee about official statistics from now on? I appreciate that the Government want to put a positive spin on what is—let us face it—a very difficult time for teachers and headteachers, but can he at least say that any further statistics coming out of the Department will be in line with the code of practice set by the UK Statistics Authority? I ask that because without the actual numbers, without us all knowing what we are talking about, it is very hard to have a proper debate. This should be a cross-party debate; a child’s life in education will span several colours of Government, so it is important that we get the figures right.

As another hon. Members have said, there are many reasons for the current situation. It is an equation: money in versus money out. The money out, which ends up on the frontline of teaching, is less than it ought to be. In fact, when we take into account inflation, rising student numbers, national insurance contributions, the apprenticeship levy and so on, the estimate is that we are £2.8 billion behind where we should be, given all those extra burdens, compared with 2015.

We are seeing examples of all this in our schools. Let me give the example from my constituency of Thameside Primary School, which services one of the most deprived areas in the country—they exist in Oxford West and Abingdon, too, even though that is not always obvious. These schools are not now using their pupil premium money to do things such as fund trips. They try to do that, but actually what they are doing now is employing link workers to help families to access basic benefits. They do not update the books in their library, because they cannot. Meanwhile, local authority cuts have meant that mobile libraries no longer bring the new books to the children of the school. They have had to cut forest school. I do not know whether other hon. Members have forest school in their constituencies, but it is incredibly important and I wish I had had it in my school. At Thameside Primary School they have had to cut it completely. In other schools in my constituency they have reduced the hours, because they do not have enough members of staff to service it.

The Conservative manifesto said that £4 billion would be put into schools by 2022. How close are we to achieving that manifesto commitment? I would get behind it—let us all get together and put extra money into schools. The former Secretary of State attributed £1.3 billion to the education budget. In the Public Accounts Committee we have been asking the Department where that money will come from, and we are yet to get an answer for about half of it. It was all to come from within the existing budget and through the cancellations of some programmes, but at the time of questioning about half of it was still unaccounted for, so I ask the Minister: where will that money come from?

There are broader consequences to this lack of funding for our schools, particularly the paring down of the curriculum. We now have schools that no longer offer the full range of modern foreign languages and creative subjects. Those students who—God forbid—do not love maths and science, which was the case even in my classroom, need the full range of opportunities to succeed. The unfortunate fact is that in the current state of affairs schools are paring down what they are able to offer and providing fewer opportunities for students to get on. I ask the Minister: is education a funding priority for this Government? What has he asked the Chancellor to give to education in the Budget? Can he give a commitment, genuinely, that every school in this country will be able to offer the full-range curriculum, which we want all children to have access to?

10.32 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this timely debate.

This is not a boast I want to make, but when I came into this place York was the seventh worst funded authority, and today it is the very worst funded authority. We have exchanged places in the league tables. That is why I am speaking in this debate. Some 18 out of 23 primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools in my constituency have had their funding cut. Like most MPs, I meet with my schools on a regular basis. The crisis in funding has come to the fore. I want the Minister to take away the point that when schools are struggling, the outcomes of those schools are affected.

York has one of the biggest attainment gaps in the country, particularly around early years, and we have seen severe cuts to our primary schools. We are therefore seeing a significant minority underachieving by 10%. The Minister needs to focus on those figures, which correlate with funding.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to what is happening in primary and secondary schools, but does she share my concern that sixth forms have been hardest hit? I was shocked by the Institute for Fiscal Studies submission to the Education Committee on school and college funding, which found
that per-pupil funding in post-16 education will be the same in real terms in 2019-20 as it was 30 years ago. Does that not show that the Government are failing to address the needs of young people in the future?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I meet with colleges in my constituency, where the cuts have been the greatest in real terms, the attainment is the worst. We can easily see the correlation between money and outcomes. If we make those cuts, we must expect those children to be short-changed, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

We are also seeing a change in class sizes. York has the second biggest increase in the teacher-classroom ratio in its primary schools and the fourth biggest fall in staffing numbers in primary schools, with 20 teachers leaving between 2014 and 2017—that has an impact. We have seen the biggest increase in class sizes in secondary schools across the country—the relevant figure is 2.9, with the next biggest being 1.8. In secondary schools, York has the joint biggest teacher-classroom ratio. Pupil numbers are increasing. I know at least one school in my constituency that is really struggling and does not know how it will accommodate its children next year.

We have also experienced a real turnover of teaching staff, as hon. Members have mentioned. Experienced teachers are leaving and being replaced. In one school around 60 teachers have moved and newly qualified teachers have been brought in. That has an impact on the experience of staff and therefore on the teaching of students. We are also seeing the impact on vital support staff. When the pay increase was announced, schools had to find the resource to pay their support staff, which resulted in many having to leave. We must focus on them as well.

The excellent head teacher of Millthorpe School in my constituency, Trevor Burton, had to write to parents to inform them of the reality and what they can expect. My final point is about budgets and where we need to focus.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Can you wind up?

Rachael Maskell: Yes. I have talked about buildings and attainment, and I concur with all hon. Members about mental health support, which we desperately need. Ultimately, however, schools just need to have funds.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): There are 10 minutes remaining for each of the Front-Bench speakers. If they could give up 20 or 25 seconds of that to allow Anne Main to respond, that would be appreciated.

10.40 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this timely debate a few days before the Budget. She has stood up for schools in Hertfordshire, which have faced and are facing a £33-million cut since 2015. She is right to defend the schools in her constituency. While reading out the parliamentary Labour party brief, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) pointed out, she also alluded to the disingenuousness of the statistics that have come from the Department. That was also alluded to by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

The Department is fast becoming the ministry for dodgy stats. We have heard that we have the third highest spend in the OECD, which was knocked back because it included private school fees and other items. We have heard that there is more new money for our schools, which was knocked back by the Office for National Statistics. We have also heard that 1.9 million children are in good or outstanding schools. I am desperate to see whether the Minister repeats that, because it was pulled up by the UK Statistics Authority. The Minister must have forgotten to tell the Prime Minister that though, because she repeated the stat in Prime Minister’s questions. We have heard that the Government will fully fund the pay rise—another dodgy stat for teachers up and down our country.
Lilian Greenwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s disingenuous attempts to override the statistics are failing, because parents, pupils and teachers know precisely what is happening? That is why I welcomed children and parents from SOS East Midlands to Parliament a fortnight ago. They know that 82 out of 84 schools in Nottingham city face cuts, including every single school in my constituency, they know that their children’s schools are losing an average of £296 per pupil, and they say that that is not good enough. It has to be addressed in the forthcoming Budget.

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend articulates the point for Nottingham city brilliantly, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) did for York, where 32 schools are facing cuts.

The hon. Member for St Albans also talked about special educational needs and disability—SEND—which is vital. Last year alone, 20,000 children were off-rolled because of it. She talked about a school in her constituency, the Links Academy, which takes in many off-rolled children, but we lost 20,000 to the system. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) highlighted that problem with regard to mental health too—we do not know where 10,000 of those children are in the system. In an age when we have criminal child exploitation going through the roof and the running of county lines, the school system does not know where 10,000 children are.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that the stats that we have heard used are simply not accurate, and the UK Statistics Authority has rebuked the Education Secretary for his inaccuracy. The figures quoted by Education Ministers attempting to defend their pitiful record on state school funding included money spent by parents on private school fees. There has been a concerted effort by the Secretary of State and the Minister to fudge the figures and deflect attention away from the cuts to school funding that they have presided over.

Let us assess the facts. Some £2.8 billion has been cut from school budgets since 2015, and we will find out in a couple of weeks that that will be a lot more. That means that 91% of schools are facing real-terms budget cuts per pupil. For the average primary school, that will be a loss of about £50,000 a year. For the average secondary school, it will be a loss of about £178,000 a year. But those figures are based on last year’s data. When can we expect the Department to release the schools block funding data for 2018-19? With the inclusion of those figures, it is likely that the outlook for our schools will be even bleaker.

Perhaps the Minister will try to deflect the House’s attention away from the reality of the impact of his Government’s cuts to school funding again, but hon. Members already know the impact on the ground all too well, as headteachers and parents are telling us about it. It is right that we are well represented by the hon. Members from West Sussex, the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said that schools are x millions of pounds down in that borough in his constituency. I have the statistic: they are £8.9 million down based on last year’s data. It will be interesting to see what next year’s data will be when the Minister releases the block funding grants. The Minister’s own schools are threatening a four-day week because of the funding cuts.

We know that the £1.3 billion of additional funding announced by the Secretary of State is nowhere near enough to reverse the £2.8 billion that has been cut since 2015. We also know that none of the money announced so far is actually new money for education. While I, of course, support the principle that all schools should receive fair funding, the answer is not to take money away from existing schools and redistribute it. A fair approach would be to apply the lessons of the best-performing areas in the country to schools everywhere. A fair approach would look objectively at the level of funding required to deliver in the best-performing schools, particularly in areas of high deprivation, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central pointed out, and use that as the basis for a formula to be applied across the whole country.

The F40 group, which includes my constituency of Trafford, has told us that school funding requires an injection of £2 billion to meet the needs of all schools, and that an early indication is that the shortfall for 2019-20 will be £3.8 billion. Schools need to see plans for the funding formula beyond 2020. They need a three to four-year rolling budget settlement so that they can plan for the future with confidence, and any settlement should take into account inflation, the cost of living increases and the wage and national insurance increases that have been pointed out by several hon. Members.

When will the Secretary of State and the Minister remove their heads from the sand and begin to truly hear the voices of schools, teachers, parents and Back Benchers from across the country? If that does not happen soon, our children’s education in St Albans, Harrow, Plymouth, York and West Sussex will continue to lose out.

10.47 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. We all admired your agility in mental maths at the beginning of the debate.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): A good education.

Nick Gibb: I am sure that that is the case. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this important debate. It is always interesting to follow a Labour spokesman talking about school funding. It was the Labour Government who left the coalition Government with a record public sector deficit of £150 billion, which is equal to 10% of GDP—on the brink of collapse—an economy in recession and high unemployment. We have reduced that deficit to under 3%, we have the lowest level of unemployment since the 1970s and we have halved youth unemployment to record low levels. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) should be more careful when he talks about public finances.

This debate is timely, given the looming Budget next week. I am sure that everybody has listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and other hon. Members who have spoken. We are determined to create an education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter what their circumstances or where they live. That is why we have delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated school funding system by introducing the national funding formula for schools, which previous Governments had shied away from doing, including the previous Labour Government.
The introduction of the national funding formula means that this year, for the first time, funding was distributed to local authorities based on the individual needs and characteristics of every school in the country. This historic reform is the biggest improvement to school funding for a decade and it is directing resources to where they are needed most.

This Government want to ensure that all children receive a world-class education, and we have made significant progress. More schools than ever before are rated good or outstanding; 86% of schools are now rated good or outstanding, compared with—

**Mike Kane:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nick Gibb:** I will not give way.

That figure compares with 66%, which is what we inherited from the previous Government. The attainment gap is beginning to close and we have launched 12 opportunity areas to drive improvement in parts of the country that we know can do better. Children’s reading ability is also improving. We have risen from joint eighth in PIRLS, the progress in international reading ability is also improving. We have risen from the country that we know can do better . Children’s
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However, we have made those achievements against a backdrop of inheriting an unfair method of distributing funding, which has hindered and not helped progress. Across the country, schools with similar pupil characteristics used to receive markedly different levels of funding for no good reason, meaning that the right resources did not reach the schools that needed them most. That is why it is so important that we have delivered on our promise to reform the unfair school and high-needs funding systems and introduced a national funding formula.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. The formula has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school this year, with increases of up to 3% for underfunded schools. Next year, those schools that have been historically underfunded will attract increases of up to 6% more per pupil compared with 2017-18, as we continue to address historic injustices.

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chipstead, the Member for Chichester, Gillian Keegan was right to point to improving standards in her constituency and she was also right to refer to special needs funding, which I will come to. Under the national funding formula, the amounts allocated to schools in her constituency will rise by 3.4% in 2019-20 compared with 2017-18.

I was interested to hear about the “Politics and Pasties” roundtable that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, Luke Pollard held. I would love to have been there; nevertheless, I would be delighted to meet headteachers from his constituency at some point very soon. Pupils in Plymouth will be funded on the same basis as in the rest of the country, despite what he said, under the national funding formula. That is the whole purpose of the national funding formula: based on the same needs, those pupils will receive the same amount. The hon. Gentleman referred to the gains cap, which ensures that changes in funding can be smoothed over the years under the national funding formula. Approximately 75% of schools that gain under the national funding formula—the same that were historically underfunded—will be fully on their national funding formula.

The hon. Member for York Central raised the issue of York’s position in the national league tables of school funding, but I should point out to her that the amount allocated to schools in her constituency will rise by 5.4% in 2019-20, compared with the baseline of 2017-18. We have made a significant—

**Mike Kane:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nick Gibb:** No, I will not give way, because I am running out of time.

**Mike Kane rose—**

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Order. The Minister is not giving way.

**Nick Gibb:** We have made a significant investment in our schools by providing an additional £1.3 billion across this year and next, which is over and above the funding confirmed in the 2015 spending review. The additional money means that core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion this year, and to £43.5 billion in 2019-20. As the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, funding for five to 16-year-olds will be maintained in real terms per pupil across this year and next year. The IFS has also pointed out that by 2020 real terms per pupil funding will be some 70% higher than it was in 1990 and 50% higher than it was in 2000.

Of course we recognise that we are asking schools to do more and that schools are facing cost pressures. That is why the Department is providing extensive support to schools to reduce cost pressures. We have recently launched “Supporting excellent school resource management”, a document that provides schools with practical advice on savings that can be made on the £10 billion of non-staffing expenditure in schools. It summarises the support the Department is offering to help schools to get the best value from their resources, including things...
such as buying equipment more cheaply and the new teacher supply agency framework, which ensures that fees paid by schools to agencies are transparent and that people are aware of what they are signing up to.

Another issue that was raised was, of course, high needs. We are firmly committed to supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities to reach their full potential. That is why we have reformed the funding for these children by introducing a high-needs national funding formula. We have invested an extra £1 billion in funding for children with high needs since 2013 and next year we will provide local authorities in England with over £6 billion in high needs funding, which is up from just under £5 billion in 2013. We recognise the challenges that local authorities face with their high needs budgets, which is why we have provided them with support to deliver the best value from their high needs funding. We are also monitoring our national funding formula for high needs and keeping the overall level of funding under review.

The issue of teachers’ pay and pensions was also raised. We have responded to the recommendation made by the school teachers’ review body to confirm the 2018 pay award for teachers, which will see a substantial 3.5% uplift for the main pay range, a 2% uplift for the upper pay range and a 1.5% uplift for the leadership pay range. That will ensure that schools are supported to continue to attract high-quality staff members and retain them.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way, because of time.

We are funding the teachers’ pay award above the 1% that schools will already have budgeted for, by providing a teachers’ pay grant worth £187 million in 2018-19 and £321 million in 2019-20. This funding will be over and above the funding that schools receive through the national funding formula.

I want to give time to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans to respond briefly to the debate, so I will conclude by thanking all Members who have contributed to this important debate. It is a key priority for this Government to ensure that every child receives a world-class education, to enable them to reach their full potential. I believe that the significant extra investment that we are making in our schools—both revenue and capital, and distributed more fairly through the national funding formula—will help us to achieve that.

10.58 am

Mrs Main: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. Let me tell the Minister that I am going to mark my own homework. I will give myself four out of 10, because I have obviously not managed to convey the level of frustration that my teachers have been experiencing. The statistics are all fabulous and wonderful, but there is a reason why I am no good at maths, because they actually do not mean a lot to me. To me, they mean that there is a great effort on behalf of this Government to do the right thing from current underfunding, but the reality is that teachers on the ground face huge pressures, and we have got to look into this.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said that teachers are running on empty, and he is not alone. I did not refer to attainments in St Albans because I know that we do very well. However, as a former teacher, I recognise that there is value added that does not always show too well in attainment charts. Nevertheless, teachers have put in a lot of effort to bring pupils from a very low base up to a higher base, and we cannot just say that because pupils have been achieving, funding is therefore not needed. That is not the case. All schools and all teachers should have the resources they need. I will keep pressing on this issue, because this is something that we need to take forward collaboratively, because otherwise we would be letting down the children of the future. So I am sorry to say that I will put my dunce’s cap on and say that I could not persuade the Minister today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order no. 10(6)).
Asylum Seekers: Right to Work

11 am

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum seekers’ right to work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful that this debate has been granted. I am also grateful to those right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken to me about this important issue and those who have been able to join us today.

Throughout my time as a Member of Parliament, my constituency has been a dispersal area for asylum seekers, so I have seen both models—allowing asylum seekers to work and not allowing them to do so—under Governments of different political persuasions. However, since 2002, regulations have slowly changed, and now most people seeking asylum are completely unable to work. Until 2002, people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom could apply for permission to work if they had been waiting six months or more for an initial decision on their asylum claim. In July 2002, that provision was withdrawn, except in exceptional cases.

In February 2005, there was a further change: a new immigration rule was introduced to allow people seeking asylum to apply for permission to work in the UK if they had been waiting over 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum claim. Most recently, in 2010, the right to work after 12 months was extended to those who had made further submissions on their claim. At the same time, however, the right to work was restricted to jobs on the shortage occupation list, which is a restricted list that includes nuclear medical practitioners—or, in parlance that the rest of us might understand, radiographers—and classical ballet dancers.

The Home Office’s target for decisions on asylum cases is six months. In the most recent immigration statistics, released in the second quarter of this year, the number of main applicants waiting over six months for a decision on their asylum claim increased. For main applicants and dependents, 48% of people waiting for an initial decision had been waiting for over six months.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The right hon. Lady’s constituency is next to mine, so I fully understand some of the problems that she is raising, and I agree that we need to have a good look at them. A large number of asylum seekers have some very good qualifications, but cannot get the right to work, and some of them have young families to take care of. That drives them into destitution, to say the least. The Home Office now has to look at the asylum process and speed it up but, more importantly, try to give those people work where they can.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is indeed my next-door neighbour in the west midlands, where we have enjoyed an incredible economic boom since the downturn in 2008. A number of businesses are short of skilled labour, which is one of the things that has helped our region back up, yet asylum seekers waiting for an initial decision have the kind of skills that our industries so desperately need. As a west midlands MP, I find it difficult to ignore that fact.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this important issue. The Government have been able to allocate some Syrian families to Newtownards, the major town of in my constituency. In conjunction with local community groups and local churches, we have come together to find those people accommodation and get their children into school, but also enable some access to English language classes, which will enable them to apply for jobs. With all the good will that clearly exists, with Government allocating asylum seekers locations to be housed in and the local community coming together to help, does the right hon. Lady feel that there is a need to do something with English language classes—not a voluntary group, which is the way it is being done in Newtownards, but something separate from Government? Those classes enable asylum seekers to get jobs.

Dame Caroline Spelman: As a linguist, the issue of English language learning for refugees and asylum seekers is close to my heart. If people cannot speak the language of the country that they are in, it is difficult for them to work there, so that learning is indispensable. Like the hon. Gentleman, I have had Syrian families dispersed to my constituency, and I was delighted to discover at a fringe meeting at Conservative party conference that one young Syrian lady had managed to get employment with Starbucks. A number of employers in this country go out of their way to provide job opportunities for asylum seekers, but he is absolutely right that being able to speak the language is a prerequisite.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful that the right hon. Lady has secured this important debate. In my surgeries, I have had a City banker who is now completely destitute, with no recourse to public funds, and somebody who works in the hospitality sector, at a time when we desperately need hospitality workers and care workers. Is it not right that these people should, first of all, be able to work, but that they should at least receive some resources to be able to feed their families?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I will illustrate shortly with some case studies, being able to work transforms the situation of asylum seekers. It hugely helps their mental health, because they can integrate better, and they contribute to our economy, which is a positive for the host nation.

Waiting indefinitely for the determination of a claim can have serious effects on mental wellbeing. I have seen that all too often in my constituency, because it is a dispersal area. I have seen young men in particular who are very depressed and isolated, and even suicidal at times. I put myself in their shoes: if I had to live on £5.39 a day, struggling to support a family while feeling that my talents, my education, and everything I had learned was wasted, I would feel really down. Sadly, in those moments of isolation, I would be focused on the reasons I had left my country of origin, and some of the terrors that had caused me to flee my home. I have seen far too many asylum seekers in my surgery who have been depressed by their experience, and enabling them to work would, I think, be transformational.

On the positive side, I will share the experience of some of my constituents who managed to get work. I remember well a group of Iraqi Kurdish asylum seekers who managed to get work in a food factory. While it
was not a particularly pleasant job, the men were happy. They were only earning the minimum wage, but even that filled them with pride. It meant that they were no longer completely reliant on the state, and while they were out working in that food factory they had a sense of community, both within their Kurdish community and the wider community working in that factory.

Another example from my constituency—one I am never going to forget—is the very long drawn-out battle that I had to solve the asylum claim of a lady from the Congo, who fled after her husband was executed in front of her. It took me eight years to resolve that case, and not surprisingly, she was deeply depressed. Many was the weekend after my surgery when I lay awake at night, worrying about this woman and her very young child. You can imagine how I felt when I arrived at my surgery, opened the door, and saw this young woman with a smile from ear to ear and a little thank-you card for me, as her right to remain had been granted. Already, she was working as a care assistant in a local care home, contributing to our economy. I am never going to forget that as long as I live.

Even the opportunity to volunteer can break the cycle of depression and hopelessness. A gentleman called Godfrey arrived in the UK from Uganda and spent a considerable amount of time in the asylum system, and was not allowed to work. During that time he volunteered for several organisations, including the British Red Cross, and attended employability training with the support organisation Restore. In recent years, he has been employed, first in the care sector and then in housing support. His experiences in the asylum system have made him passionate about helping others who, in his view, are worse off than him. Inability to work, Godfrey argues, can lead to problems of isolation among people seeking asylum, including mental health issues, diabetes, blood pressure problems, stress, and the depression I have referred to. Worse, he has known friends forced into poverty and made vulnerable to abuse and manipulation, such as through gangs, prostitution and drug trafficking. There are countless human examples demonstrating the capacity of work to aid integration and promote good mental health among those seeking asylum. It is a good thing.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On the right hon. Lady’s point about positive integration, is she encouraged by the poll that British Future did, which indicated that 71% of the British public support the right to work as a means towards integration?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I was just coming on to the more recent research showing changing social attitudes. I very much support the research by the Lift the Ban coalition, which suggests that the current system is wasteful as it fails to harness the skills and talents of often well-educated individuals. Some 94% of people seeking asylum want to work. Some 74% have secondary-level education or higher, and 37% have a degree, which is comparable with the UK population, where 42% of people have a degree. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has also recognised the gap, saying that allowing asylum seekers in the UK greater access to the labour markets would not only increase individuals’ self-reliance but avoid the loss of skills. Abilities and skills need to be used if they are not to become rusty or obsolete.

Allowing asylum seekers to work could save public money as well as provide an economic boost. Lift the Ban estimates that if 50% of the people waiting six months for a decision on their initial asylum application were able to work full time on the national average wage, the Government would receive an extra £31.6 million a year from their tax and national insurance contributions. Moving them off subsistence support but retaining support for accommodation would save the public purse £10.8 million a year. The total net gain would be much as £42.4 million.

Among European countries, the UK prescribes the lengthiest restrictions before people seeking asylum are given the right to work. In that regard, we are something of an international outlier. In comparable countries, people are largely given the opportunity to support themselves sooner. For example, the USA, Spain and the Netherlands all allow work after six months, Germany and Switzerland allow work after three months, and Canada allows asylum seekers to work on day one. In the UK, however, asylum seekers must wait a minimum of 12 months before they are given the right to work. I ask the Government to review that.

There is an indication of a wider shift in public opinion, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) pointed out. There is a letter in today’s *Daily Telegraph* from 16 religious community leaders who have signed an open letter commending the efforts of Lift the Ban and calling for the right to work to be restored after asylum seekers have waited six months for a decision. As the hon. Gentleman said, polling undertaken this year shows that when asked, 71% of people agree with the following statement: “When people come to the UK seeking asylum it is important they integrate, learn English and get to know people. It would help integration if asylum seekers were allowed to work if their claim takes more than six months.”

Given public support for such a change and that in these times of near full employment we are short of workers in key areas, surely we can now look at asylum seekers’ right to work more holistically and in a way that better respects their human dignity. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for attending the debate today, and I look forward to hearing whether the Government will consider allowing people seeking asylum and their adult dependents the right to work, unconstrained by the shortage occupation list.

11.13 am

**The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):** I did wonder whether the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was going to contribute. I am not sure whether she had indicated as such to you, Mr Betts.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): First, I want to apologise. I was not just at the Macmillan coffee morning; I was the host. I was giving a speech, and it was a very difficult one to cut short. I apologise. I will not take up the Minister’s time further.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you. That at least clears that up. I very much appreciate the words of wisdom I have heard on many occasions from the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who secured the debate. I absolutely
recognise that the rights of asylum seekers and refugees are an important issue to them. It is a subject on which they have spoken many times in this House, with much knowledge and erudition.

This debate on access to work for those claiming asylum is important. We can see that, for a 30-minute debate, it has provoked a lot of interest from the House. Members may well want to intervene, and I will certainly be happy to take interventions, but I particularly want to thank the Lift the Ban coalition for its recent report, which was sent to me. It raised a number of important points.

Members will know that the UK has a proud history of providing protection to those who need it. This Government are committed to delivering a fair and humane asylum system. We are tackling the delays in decision making to ensure that most asylum seekers receive a decision within six months. In the year ending June 2018, we granted protection or other forms of leave to more than 14,000 people, and we are increasing integration support for all refugees to help them rebuild their lives here and realise their potential.

I am sure Members share my appreciation for the excellent work that all agencies do to help and protect these very vulnerable people, but our protection does not end there. All those claiming asylum are provided with accommodation and support to meet their essential living needs if they would otherwise be destitute. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised that issue. They are entitled to full access to healthcare and, for those under 18, access to full-time education. Those recognised as refugees, including those resettled here, have immediate and unrestricted access to work and other services that can support their integration.

As might be expected from a former Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, I certainly recognise the importance of work when it comes to physical and mental wellbeing, building a wider sense of contribution to our society and community integration.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Minister knows that I have a lot of respect for her, but given that the Government rightly put a lot of emphasis on tackling loneliness—there are all sorts of strategies about that—surely she can understand that one way of tackling loneliness for asylum seekers would be allowing them to work.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting and important point. When I was at the DWP, I was often to be found saying that work was good not only for people’s financial wellbeing, but for their emotional and physical wellbeing. We know that children will have better outcomes if their parents are in work.

I am often to be heard talking about finding better routes into work for our refugee populations. I absolutely recognise that we have a great deal of work to do in that respect, because the employment outcomes for refugees are way below the general population, and way below where we would want them to be, notwithstanding the fact that we know that many people who come here, particularly under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, have specific challenges, which may be about long-term sickness or having large families or children with disabilities. We in this place and in this Chamber will all know that we have established many of our networks, relationships and friendships through our colleagues and through being at work. It is important that we find successful routes in.

I am referencing refugee communities in particular, but it is not lost on me that I receive many representations from right hon. and hon. Members, from the non-governmental organisation community and from individual asylum seekers whom I have had the opportunity and privilege to meet. They, too, would like the opportunity to be able to make a contribution and establish the same levels of networks and friendships that we all do through work.

I am listening carefully to the complex arguments about permitting asylum seekers to work, and I will of course consider further evidence that comes forward. As many Members will know, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden rehearsed, the Government’s current policy is to grant those seeking asylum in the UK permission to work where their claim, through no fault of their own, has not been decided after 12 months. Those allowed to work are limited to jobs on the shortage occupation list, which is based on expert advice from the Migration Advisory Committee. My right hon. Friend made her point absolutely perfectly by referring to ballet dancers.

The policy aims to protect the resident labour market and ensure that any employment meets our needs for skilled labour. Members will know that the shortage occupation list is currently under review. All asylum seekers can make a valuable contribution to their local communities by undertaking volunteering activities. My right hon. Friend referenced the event she hosted recently alongside Refugee Action. We heard about the experiences of a number of people who had been through the VPRS and the asylum system more generally. The point about language was made repeatedly.

I was most struck by a young lady who had come here on the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. She had been in the country for only six months and she used what I regarded as a terrible term, which I utterly reject, when she said, “I was useless.” That really struck home because in no way was that young woman useless. Within six months she had got herself to such a level of English that she gave a word-perfect speech to a packed room at the Conservative party conference. That will not win many accolades, but it is not lost on me that I receive many representations from some Members here today, but conference is a tough gig. It is not always the easiest audience to speak to, but she did it beautifully. She said, “Six months ago I was useless, but now I am sitting here, working, and able to give a speech to you all.” It was hugely impressive. We also heard from a gentleman called Godfrey—the same gentleman my right hon. Friend referenced in her speech—who spoke at length about how volunteering had enabled him to feel that he was making an important contribution and given him back a sense of self-worth.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about how his community had wrapped its arms around Syrian families who had been resettled under VPRS. The work that we have done on community sponsorship, learnt from other countries such as Canada, has absolutely shown us that communities are willing to accept and welcome refugees into their midst. They are
often best placed to help and are incredibly supportive, providing a network that enables refugees to make friends they can turn to for support in times of crisis. I might sound like a stuck record, but also provided are those all-important routes into work, which we all recognise are important.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Hon. Members cannot intervene from the Front Bench.

Caroline Nokes: Oh. You have educated me, Mr Betts, but I will certainly be happy to take up any issues that the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise with me outside the Chamber.

Our position is also comparable and consistent with the immigration rules for non-EEA nationals wishing to come here and work in the UK, but that approach could be undermined if non-EEA nationals were able to bypass the rules by lodging unfounded asylum claims. It is an unfortunate reality that some migrants make such claims to stay in the UK, and it is reasonable to assume that they do so because of the benefits, real or perceived, that they think they will gain.

Currently, around half of those who seek asylum in the UK are found not to need international protection. Allowing earlier or unrestricted access to work risks undermining our asylum system by encouraging unfounded claims from those seeking employment opportunities we sit asylum decision makers with both junior barristers and presenting officers so that they can better understand and learn what type of case is most likely to be granted at appeal so that cases can be granted earlier. They have a much better opportunity to learn from each other and to make sure that the right decisions are made in the first place.

I recognise that there is a significant debate about the evidence to demonstrate that policy changes made by Government act as a pull factor. I am not pretending for one moment that migration choices are not complex, and I know that isolating the impact of individual policy changes is far from straightforward, but there is evidence that policies affect migrant behaviour. It is also reasonable to assume that economic incentive is at least one element in a range of factors that encourage people to choose to move to a particular destination after first reaching a safe country.

Paul Blomfield: I congratulate the Minister on what has been a thoughtful and helpful speech. Can she point us to the evidence about pull factors? The Home Office’s own work on this issue indicates that the right to work is not a pull factor.

Caroline Nokes: I can point to evidence from Germany, where a change in policy saw a significant increase in the numbers arriving. Interestingly—the hon. Gentleman might be fascinated by this—that was a point that I removed from my speech. I am conscious that we are concerned about pull factors. We do not want anybody making risky or perilous journeys with the aim of an economic goal, as opposed to fleeing from persecution, but of course we recognise that they can be in a position where they cannot make a choice and have to make such a journey. I felt that the message given by that chunk of my speech was too harsh. We have a fantastic reputation in this country for being a safe haven for those in need, and I really want to build on that. However, I want to build on it through schemes such as VPRS, Mandate and Gateway. Various hon. Members here have heard me speak previously about ambitions to turn them into far more holistic and comprehensive schemes instead of what strikes me as a piecemeal approach.

Caroline Nokes: I will give way, although I am conscious that I am running out of time.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is being incredibly generous. On that point, I welcome her commitment to more holistic schemes. Does she therefore agree that if we want to prevent dangerous journeys, one of the best things we can do is honour the commitments we have made under the UN global compact on refugees and actually expand resettlement? Let us make it easier so that people do not feel forced to make dangerous journeys and let us encourage our allies and other countries to do the same.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right that we need a whole-route approach. We have to look to where we can build stronger alliances, but I am also very clear that we must make sure that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. We know that in many cases that does not happen. We also know that in many cases—I referenced this earlier—refugees who have been granted status find it difficult to enter the job market, but that is for very understandable reasons. Rather than encourage further integration for those who might eventually not qualify for protection, our priority is focused on our efforts to support those who most need it.

We are taking action to support refugees to integrate and find employment as quickly as possible so that they can establish themselves and build lives here. The “Integrated Communities Strategy” Green Paper, published in March
this year, underlined that commitment. It also set out
the Government’s priorities to focus on English language,
employment, mental health and cultural orientation.
When I was in Jordan during the summer recess, I was
struck by the work going on there on cultural orientation
for people who were yet to be resettled. There were
interesting and fascinating discussions in the session
that I was able to be part of, but what really struck me
was the importance of doing more on that front. In
many cases people who are eligible and accepted for
resettlement will wait many months before they make
the journey here. We should not miss the opportunity to
make sure that their cultural orientation and language
preparation is as good as it can be. The Syrian refugees
who had some level of English were really keen to use it,
practise it and have conversations, whereas others in the
group clearly felt much more isolated because they did not have that opportunity.

We will publish our response to the consultation later
this autumn. There is a great deal more to be said about
integration and training and employment. One of my
first visits as a Minister was to Bradford, where I visited
the specialist training and employment programme, which was all about moving refugees into work and
helping them build a CV, improve their English and
then find the great employment opportunities that we
know are out there, with companies such as Ben & Jerry’s,
with its ice academy, and Starbucks. Indeed, the STEP—
skills, training and employment pathways—programme
was working very closely with Tesco.

I have very few moments left, but I want to reassure
Members that I am listening carefully to the argument.
There is much merit in it. My right hon. Friend the
Member for Meriden has certainly conveyed her views
extremely clearly and well. The issue is multifaceted and
complex. I look forward to further discussions with
Members and NGO colleagues. I remain receptive to the
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complex. I look forward to further discussions with
Members and NGO colleagues. I remain receptive to the
views and evidence presented to me on the right to work.
However, it is important that we recognise that there is
a balance to be struck and that we make sure we make
the right decisions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am
Sitting suspended.
The couple approached the children—it was 11 o'clock at night—and discovered that they had collected a discarded hoodie and some half-empty bottles, including shampoo and shower gel. The couple wrote: “This is not the Liverpool we know and has left us angry, outraged and very upset.”

Those constituents of mine have a right to be angry. We should all be angry. Let me not mince my words, because poverty kills. Infant mortality is a key indicator of poverty in our country. In 2014, across England and Wales the death rate of babies under the age of one was six in every 1,000 births. In Liverpool, the figure was nine in every 1,000 births—50% higher. In Liverpool, the avoidable death rate from diseases such as cancer, heart disease, respiratory disease and diabetes is 326 people in 100,000; in the Chilterns, it is 138 per 100,000. Life expectancy is 10.1 years lower for men and 8.1 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of Liverpool compared with some of the least deprived.

Let me briefly set out some city-wide context. I am grateful to the always excellent Commons Library, and Liverpool City Council’s policy team, for collating some of the facts that I will present. Liverpool is the fourth most deprived local authority in our country. Alongside Middlesbrough and Manchester, Liverpool is ranked joint most fuel poverty deprived local authority in England—that refers to people being unable to afford to keep their homes adequately heated, which is particularly relevant as we embark on the winter months.

Since 2012, Trussell Trust food banks in the city have fed 108,635 people, 36% of them children. Last year alone, more than 6,700 children had to rely on the generosity of our city’s food banks, and in the same period Liverpool City Council has made more than 13,000 crisis payments to help people with the cost of food, fuel and clothing. That was a 6% increase on the previous year. In fact, the council spends £23 million a year dealing with a range of issues surrounding poverty and homelessness to try to prevent that poverty from turning into destitution.

Despite those enormous efforts, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that Liverpool was second in the city rankings on destitution. Let us be clear about what we mean when we talk about destitution, because it is the most extreme form of poverty. It means someone sleeping rough for more than a day, not eating properly for two days, being unable to heat or light their home for five days, going without proper clothes or toiletries, or receiving an income so low that those basic essentials will stay out of reach. That is the reality for too many. Sustained low income coupled with a financial shock were the most significant triggers for a plunge into destitution, against a backdrop of benefit, health and debt issues.

Liverpool was the first council in the country to carry out an assessment of the combined impact of the Government’s changes to various welfare policies. It found that 3,400 households across the city with a long-term sick or disabled resident have been hit by the bedroom tax. It found that families with children have been hit the hardest by the combination of a freeze in child benefit, reductions in housing benefit rates in the private sector, the introduction of the bedroom tax, and the benefit cap—policies introduced by the coalition Government and continued under the current Administration. It found that young people aged 16 to 29 account for one in three applications for council emergency payments, that single private tenants aged 25 to 35 have seen a cut of around £34 a week in their housing benefit, and that 60% of those affected by a cut in council tax support, and 65% of those hit by the bedroom tax.

By 2020, £444 million will have been slashed from our council’s central Government support since 2010. When adjusted for inflation, that equates to a cut of 64% of the council’s overall budget over the last decade. Of course, times have been tough everywhere. Can we be accused of special pleading, or parading our poverty? No. Government policies have created more need, while at the same time Government cuts have made it harder to meet those needs. The Government have changed the funding formulae that once helped to support the most deprived cities such as Liverpool with historically high rates of poverty and low council tax bases.

Central Government support has been slashed and councils such as Liverpool have been told to make up the difference from business rates and council tax payers. However, we are unable to replace that funding with higher demands on our hard-pressed council tax payers and businesses, because such a high proportion of our properties are in the lowest band: council tax band A. In fact, council tax across the city raises just 11% of the council’s annual spending on its vital services. If Liverpool had experienced the average cut for local authorities across the country from 2010 to 2020, our city would be more than £70 million better off. Instead, it is having to deliver services with 3,000 fewer staff.

According to End Child Poverty’s analysis, 32,000 children are growing up in poverty across our city. In my constituency alone, 6,129 children—one in three—live in poverty. In one ward, Picton, more than half of children are growing up in poverty, while in nearby Kensington and Fairfield the figure is 45%. Figures from the Children’s Society show that approximately 3,300 children in my constituency live in families who experience problem debt; I do not need to tell the Minister all the pressures and challenges that come with that. Across Liverpool, more than 17,000 children receive free school meals, and there are continuing concerns that during school holidays too many of them are going hungry.

I congratulate Liverpool City Council on ensuring that all our children’s centres have stayed open despite Government cuts. Picton and Kensington children’s centre has been working with the Granby Toxteth Development Trust to provide meals during the school holidays. It says: “We are dealing with huge issues of food poverty, and as of September we have also built in after school play sessions with a meal included to tackle this.”

I anticipate that hon. Friends will want to talk in more detail about how our amazing football fans are collecting every week for their city’s food banks. They do not just sing “You’ll Never Walk Alone”; they prove it with their generosity—and not just the Reds, but the Blues, too.

Not long after I was elected in 2012, I became the first Member to secure a debate about the food banks popping up across the country to patch the holes that the coalition Government’s decimating policies had created in the safety net for those most in need. But let us pause for a moment and ask: why, in 2018, in one of the
richest countries in the world, do we have food banks at all? Why have more than a million people had to access emergency food aid on their own or their family’s behalf in the past 12 months? That is an incredibly sorry state of affairs and we should all be ashamed of it.

Food banks stand as a testament to the generosity and decency of everyone across our country, but the citizens of Liverpool in particular. Like many hon. Friends, I have joined the biannual food collection co-ordinated by the Trussell Trust in local supermarkets. At a recent collection in Tesco, I was told that the people of Liverpool have been the most generous donors in the country. Whenever I have been involved in food collections, I have been struck by how many people stop and say, “This could be me one day—I know that I am just one weekly or monthly pay cheque away from being in that situation.” It takes just one financial shock to affect a household’s income, because so many are living literally from month to month.

Food banks also stand witness to the fact that Ministers are losing sight of their responsibility to protect the welfare of citizens in our country. Kensington and Fairfield ward in my constituency had the largest Trussell Trust food voucher count this year. In just two wards—Kensington and Fairfield, and Picton—more than 2,700 adults have been fed by food banks in the past year. Issuing food bank vouchers during my constituency work on poverty. An article quotes one of my local food bank volunteers, Kathleen Quayle:

> “The foodbank gets busier as the weather changes. From about October, when it gets colder, people are having to choose between heating and food. A lot of the people who come are ill and hungry. They’re exhausted...You can see it in their faces and that’s a travesty in a society like ours.”

I echo that sentiment. I have made several food bank visits, and I am sure that my hon. Friends will talk about similar experiences. It is just appalling to bear witness to people having to rely on emergency food aid, through no fault of their own.

We face the spectre of universal credit arriving in Liverpool this autumn. Just this weekend, the *Liverpool Echo* published a story about “James”, who is originally from my constituency and now lives in another part of the city. He lost his job and was put on universal credit. He is just 31, but his experience was so traumatising that he considered suicide and his wife turned to sex work to bring some income into the family. With no money for three months and all their possessions sold, they were up to their eyes in short-term high-interest loans and left destitute and abandoned by our Government.

That is happening now, not just in Liverpool but in other cities. It is absolutely appalling.

Maggie O’Carroll, who leads our local enterprise hub, says that more than 425 businesses have been established by unemployed people and nurtured through the hub since 2016. As I said, ours is a city of creative and determined people, but Maggie warns:

> “Universal Credit poses a very real barrier to those who depend on benefits and wish to become self-employed to launch their own start-up business.”

I ask the Minister to respond to that point in particular, because it has so many implications that have not been addressed.

Just last month, Liverpool City Council published its own forensic analysis, “Universal Credit: Unintended Consequences”, which should be in every Minister’s red box. It shows that it is the poorest, sickest and most disabled people—who are living in the city’s most deprived wards and have already been hit hardest by the bedroom tax, failed personal independence payment assessments and housing benefit changes—who will suffer most from the dangerously out-of-control roll-out of universal credit. Debbie Nolan, health programme manager at Liverpool Citizens Advice, says:

> “Payment delays and high rates of deductions once UC is in place will cause unprecedented hardship for the most vulnerable”.

To those who are looking for work, it is unfathomable that in the past year the Government have closed jobcentres across our city. In my constituency, Edge Hill and Wavertree jobcentres have both closed, which follows the closure of Old Swan jobcentre in 2012. More than 3,000 people in Liverpool, Wavertree are being denied the local help that they need to find work. I have highlighted in debates and campaigns the distances that my constituents have to travel—another barrier that makes it even more challenging for them to get on with finding work—but it has fallen on deaf ears.

Figures from the Department for Work and Pensions show that nationally, from May 2017 to April 2018, 359,000 universal credit claimants were referred for sanction decisions, of which 71% related to attending or participating in work-focused interviews. Looking at the jobcentre closures in my constituency, it is not hard to understand why so many people have been affected.

I am already hearing from single parents who want to get to their jobcentre but cannot afford the bus because they have not been given their payments. They are having to walk for miles, and they cannot get childcare. I have raised those very real challenges with the Government but they have not been addressed. The latest statistics show that 5% of universal credit sanctions lasted for 27 weeks—more than half a year—with no access to support. That is not acceptable.

Increasing numbers of people are homeless on our streets in Liverpool, despite our council spending £12 million to alleviate the worst distress. That situation is replicated in other cities, including here in the capital. Other constituents of mine have found themselves shut out of work after episodes of ill health because our NHS regularly misses its targets for cancer and other treatment. Families are giving up work to look after elderly parents because our social services cannot afford to provide support. Parents are losing work to look after children who are too ill to go to school, but have been told that they are not ill enough to meet the rising thresholds for mental health and social services.

For example, there is the case of Ms M, a single parent of a young son with autism, who is working three days a week and was making use of 30 hours’ free childcare, only to have it withdrawn because she got lost in a bureaucratic maze. She was trying to do the right thing, but is now facing the risk of having to give up work. Where is the humanity? Where, indeed, is the cold, hard economic realisation that failing to properly and flexibly support people such as Ms M and her son to stay out of poverty raises costs for everyone?

What needs to be done? When the Chancellor delivers the Budget he needs to restore funds to our council and recommit to future Budget allocations that reflect the
depth of deprivation experienced by cities such as Liverpool. Today, Liverpool City Council is forced to spend money that it should be investing in the future on patching up the holes in the Government’s botched welfare reforms, including £3.5 million on protecting 42,000 people from the full impact of Government reductions in council tax support and £2.7 million on more than 13,000 crisis payments to help people with the cost of food, fuel, clothing and furniture. A total of £9.2 million has been provided since dedicated Government funding was withdrawn.

Secondly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must invest in Liverpool and its people. I anticipate that the Minister will tell us today that employment is up but will not mention how precarious much of that employment in our city is, thanks to the widespread and increased use of zero and low-hours contracts. He will not mention that unemployment rates across Liverpool are consistently above the national average and wages below the national average. The median household income for Liverpool is £20,373, which is nearly £11,000 below the UK median of £31,310.

We need a proper industrial strategy, including a regional investment bank, real apprenticeships and lifelong skills training to grow jobs, grow incomes and let our people grow tall. We need to devolve real economic powers to the city region. Liverpool City Region Mayor, Steve Rotheram, has made a great start in bringing our communities together, but now the Government need to get behind him and the combined authority’s efforts to transform our regional economy.

Those of us who call Liverpool home are proud of our city, but we are ashamed by its poverty. We are not looking for a handout or even a hand-up. We want a fair deal to allow us to be in charge of our own destinies. Instead, the Government are largely responsible for the poverty of too many of my constituents.

The Prime Minister told us in her conference speech the other week that austerity is over. Ministers need to set out what that will mean for the people in Liverpool. They need to acknowledge the challenge that we face, do everything possible to apologise for it but also, most importantly, help us to do everything possible to turn it around.

2.52 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on securing the debate and on her excellent and graphic description of the reality of poverty in Liverpool for far too many people.

There is no doubt that the city of Liverpool has been transformed since the days when Margaret Thatcher’s Government planned what they called its managed decline, thanks to sustained investment by the European Union over nearly 30 years, at a time when Liverpool was abandoned by central Government. It has also been helped by support from the UK Government since 1997.

Liverpool, Riverside includes a thriving city centre, the iconic waterfront and world-class universities. It is a top tourist spot and the cruise liners have returned, yet too many people in local neighbourhoods struggle with poverty, which means struggling for their day-to-day existence. As my hon. Friend said, Liverpool is the fourth most deprived local authority in the United Kingdom. Three wards in Liverpool, Riverside—Kirkdale, Princes Park and Riverside—contain some of the poorest areas in the whole country.

There are two shameful statistics that epitomise some of the problems of poverty and deprivation experienced by people in Riverside. Only 67% of 16 to 24-year-olds are economically active—regarded fit and able for work—compared with 78% nationally. Such depths of deprivation are sometimes caused by ill health or long-term problems that people experience where the economic base is in fact very low. The second figure is that 40% of children in Liverpool, Riverside—6,500 young people—suffer poverty. That is a shameful figure. Many of those children are in working families. Those are just some indicators of the depths of poverty in some communities in Liverpool, Riverside, despite the great successes of the city of Liverpool and its positive developments over the last 20 years or so. What should be done to address this?

First, we must stop the cuts and fund public services. We must recognise the importance of the public sector, specifically local government and the national health service. Liverpool City Council provides a lifeline to people in need, as well as providing support to local communities and showing civic leadership for the whole city. There should be no more cuts to Liverpool City Council. It is vital that education and social care are funded properly, both to deal with immediate need and to equip young people with the abilities and the confidence to look forward to a more positive future.

Only yesterday in this House, I met young people leaving care who were very concerned about the lack of support given on leaving the care system and moving into adulthood. They were very positive young people who very firmly wanted to be successful citizens, but they were very concerned. That lack of support is not being addressed as local authorities face cut after cut. Liverpool City Council has already lost at least 50% of its central Government grant. As local government looks ahead to the planned removal of all central Government funding, it is staring into the financial abyss.

Secondly, the Government must stop the planned roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool. Without major alterations, it will simply cause more poverty. According to the Resolution Foundation, 3.2 million working families nationally will lose £48 per week on universal credit. We have already heard about the problems of people being forced to go to food banks to eat and the stress, as well as loss of income, that people on universal credit are forced to experience. I say very clearly to the Government that they should stop the planned roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool, Riverside. There are reports that it might be about to happen, and we deserve to know exactly what the position is.

We are often told that the route out of poverty is through people getting a job. Where that is possible, I certainly agree, but there are many people who are genuinely too ill to work and that has to be recognised. For many people, getting a job is the way out of poverty and I support that, which also means that I support investment in the local economy. Regional strategies are vital. There are opportunities for jobs in Liverpool’s key sectors, such as biotech, vehicle manufacturing, the
Many people in Liverpool really need the Chancellor to deliver on the Prime Minister’s promise to end austerity. Some of them are the most vulnerable people in our society—people who need the most support and who have endured eight long years of that support and their income being systemically removed and reduced by measure after measure from Governments that, from their perspective, do not seem to care about their lives or wellbeing.

I have said before that the use of food banks is an indication of a major crisis and desperation, often amounting to destitution. People do not go to food banks for fun; food banks are an indication of crisis. People are reluctant to go to food banks because they think it is humiliating and an indication of a personal failure to feed their families or to be able to live. No matter how compassionate and helpful the volunteers and staff who distribute food at those distribution points are, it does not take away the humiliation and pain felt by those who have to resort to food banks. Many of my constituents who have been in such a position have made that very clear when I have talked to them about it.

Last year the scale of the food crisis increased, as could be seen at the south Liverpool food bank and at the Knowsley food bank, which covers the Halewood part of my constituency. It is possible to extrapolate from those two centres’ figures that, just in my constituency, in 2017-18, 3,933 people were given emergency food packages to enable them to feed themselves and their families. Some 1,457 of those helped were children—the figure increased from the previous year, which itself had increased from the figure for the year before, which had increased from the year before that. There have been increases for many years.

Last year, there was an 8% rise in the number of vouchers presented at the south Liverpool food bank and at distribution points in the Liverpool part of my constituency. In the Halewood part of Knowsley, which is in my constituency, the number of people who were helped increased by more than 20%. The number of children who were helped was up by more than 50%. In my constituency alone, more people were helped in one year than were helped by food banks in the whole of the UK in 2005. That is the reality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree was correct to make it clear in her remarks that this should not be something that we accept as inevitable. There is nothing inevitable about having to use a food bank. It could be fixed by ensuring that people who are currently in that position have the income to look after themselves. I should make it clear that other, non-food bank, help is available in my constituency, but is not counted in the figures that I just set out. It includes organisations such as Can Cook, a charity based in Garston and Halewood, last year Can Cook provided 18,000 free, fresh meals to hungry people in the Liverpool city region, some of them in my constituency.

Things are worse than the Trussell Trust figures imply; the scale of the need is greater. The experience in my constituency is that the need for emergency food help, including food bank use, is increasing, and that the poverty that it represents is deepening. In a parliamentary
answer to my question this week, the Government have yet again refused to take any action to begin to collect official statistics about the causes of such an increase in dependency on food banks, suggesting only that they will review existing sources of information to fill data gaps.

In my view, that is just not good enough. The Government seem to not want to know the truth, and so they do not bother to do research or collect statistics. I have been asking them for years to do that. I can tell the Minister what the main causes of food bank use are in my constituency: in the south Liverpool food bank, 49% of those who were helped said that the main cause of their food crisis was delays in the payment of benefits to which they are entitled, or changes to their benefits. Some 32% said the main reason was low income because of low wages, underemployment and not working enough hours to make ends meet at the end of the week or month. In Halewood, the figure for benefit delays and changes was also 49%, while the figure for low pay and lack of hours was lower, at 19%. Those figures are not untypical of Trussell Trust food banks around the country. When Ministers tell me, as they did in a recent parliamentary answer, that “People use food banks for many reasons, and it would be misleading to link them to any single cause,” they do not want to accept that the main causes of this increasing food crisis include their administration of the social security system and their austerity cuts to our safety net.

Things are about to get worse. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) spoke about the roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool, which is beginning to happen. The Trussell Trust tells us that where universal credit goes live, there is an average 52% increase in food bank use over the following year, compared with a 13% increase in the areas where universal credit has been operational for three months or less. The increase is there even after accounting for seasonal and other variations. In my constituency, only 13% of the households who are to be placed on universal credit have yet been put on to it, only 10% of the children who will be in households on universal credit have yet been affected, and only 2% of the households on sickness or incapacity benefits have yet been placed in that position.

That amounts to a looming tsunami of further hardship, misery, poverty and hunger that the Government are about to unleash on some of the poorest and most vulnerable of my constituents. Like my hon. Friend, I urge the Government to stop and not to roll out universal credit in my constituency. I can tell the Minister now that it will cause more poverty, hardship and desperation if they press on as they have told us they will.

Riverside, a registered social landlord that covers my constituency, has been surveying some of its tenants about the impact of universal credit roll-out. It says that 7% of its tenants are on universal credit, but that their rent arrears amount to 18% of the rental debt owed. Average arrears for universal credit tenants are £600, compared with £218 for households not on universal credit. That is yet more evidence that Government policy is imposing hardship and poverty on some of my poorest constituents through their social security policy. Universal credit roll-out creates more debt and hardship and an inability to meet the basic expenses of living. That is clear from the experience of some of my constituents, who have come to be on universal credit ahead of the roll-out. I have given examples before in this Chamber and in the main Chamber—egregious examples of real hardship and pain caused by universal credit, administrative failures and by other problems with the benefit.

The Church of England and Children’s Society’s recent report “Not making ends meet” highlighted that poverty is not being caused by universal credit alone, and I agree. The lowering of the benefit cap, restrictions on help with housing costs and sustained low income, including in-work poverty, are also increasing problems. I sometimes wonder whether Ministers understand the degree to which multiple changes to benefits, with cuts that were planned and announced years ago but are only now being implemented, and loss of support from other sources, such as the local authority, can affect already vulnerable and poor individuals and families, for whom one more blow might be the final straw. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report “Destitution in the UK 2018” made that point. It estimated that in 2017, across our nation, 1.5 million people were deemed to be destitute—unable to access the bare essentials to eat, stay warm and dry and keep clean. Food, clothing and heating were the most common essentials that people were without. Such destitution was found to be clustered in London and northern cities such as Liverpool, with Liverpool second only after Manchester in exhibiting the worst rates. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree also made reference to that study.

Since 2010, Liverpool has had the highest level of cuts in local authority funding. By 2020–21, almost 68% of its money will have been removed by central Government. That is £444 million-worth of cuts, despite increasing demand for the help that the city council provides for its poorer citizens. It provides a lot of help beyond the amount of money it is given by the Government to provide such help. The Liverpool citizens support scheme has seen a 5.7% increase in awards, mainly due to increasing demands for urgent needs awards. The main reasons cited were that the individual was waiting to receive a state benefit or had no funds due to an unforeseen crisis. Universal credit roll-out will increase the need hugely. I know from my own case load that if not for the Liverpool citizens support scheme, many of my constituents would have had nowhere to turn.

Similarly, discretionary housing payments have increased by 35%, and the city has to put more money in than it is given by the Government to support that. The Mayor of Liverpool tops up the money because he is unwilling to let vulnerable people go without help and have nowhere to turn and become homeless, thus imposing an even higher financial burden on the state. Universal credit roll-out could push the resources and schemes beyond the Mayor’s capacity to continue to fund them effectively. Unless we see significant measures in the Budget to alleviate poverty in Liverpool and really end austerity, the trends we are discussing will worsen. We will judge the Prime Minister’s rhetoric about ending austerity by the impact of the Chancellor’s Budget next week on the lives of our most vulnerable and poorest constituents.

3.16 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member...
for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on securing the debate. Earlier this year I led a debate here in Westminster Hall on food poverty across Merseyside. I will start today as I did then by saying that this is a debate that we simply should not be having in a wealthy country in 2018.

Liverpool City Council, as we have already heard, faces the near-impossible challenge that when services are needed most they have fewer and fewer resources to respond. I join colleagues in praising the Mayor and the city council for their efforts to mitigate the impact of central Government policy. The citizens support scheme to help the most vulnerable in Liverpool during a short-term crisis has provided a lifeline for some of the most disadvantaged citizens, following the coalition Government’s scrapping of the social fund. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree said in her opening speech, last year more than 13,000 crisis payments were made from the fund, which is a 6% increase on the previous year. It has provided a lifeline for some of my most vulnerable constituents.

Earlier this year a family of four in my constituency were served with a section 21 notice when their landlord decided to sell the property, forcing the family to look for another privately rented property, but they were not in a position to pay the one month’s rent and deposit up front. My constituents are both in work, but in low-paid jobs, so they lacked the means to provide the payment. As they faced the threat of homelessness, I referred the family to the mayoral hardship fund, and a contribution towards their deposit and rent was provided.

Another constituent was recently forced to move properties because of the bedroom tax. His personal independence payment had been stopped, so he had no available funds to purchase furniture for his new home. We referred him to the mayoral hardship fund, and funds were provided to enable him to furnish his new home.

A week before Christmas last year, a young mum contacted me, having recently been transferred on universal credit. She was not due to receive her first payment until 11 January and her gas and electricity were due to run out that evening, just before Christmas at the height of winter. In the face of that dire threat, the local authority stepped in, and, through the citizens support scheme, she was provided with a three-week award of almost £300, energy vouchers and a PayPoint cash voucher of £170.

A review of the scheme presented to the council’s cabinet in May this year set out a very stark warning, stating that the scheme “cannot mitigate the multiple impacts of the government’s programme”. The same report also warned that more people face greater hardship once the full raft of changes to the benefits system begins to bite, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) has said. Of course, as we know, disabled people often bear the brunt of such changes.

Last month Liverpool City Council published an excellent report, “Universal Credit: Unintended Consequences”. Its key findings were that universal credit risks forcing households into debt, increasing severe poverty and leaving too many people, including children, facing food insecurity, destitution and eviction. The report brought together community leaders, civic figures and politicians across the city to urge the Government, as I join my colleagues in doing today, to rethink the roll-out of universal credit before it is too late.

That call is echoed by people at the north Liverpool food bank. They told me:

“We don’t want to be feeding people emergency food, so we need to fix the system that lands people there in the first place.”

The food bank’s modest suggestion—I would go further—was that the current north Liverpool roll-out date of 5 December should at the very least be moved to new year, to avoid the Christmas period, so that claimants do not have to wait weeks for their benefits before Christmas. I urge the Minister, as a bare minimum, to give a commitment today at least to consider that proposal, which might give some reassurance and comfort to some of the most vulnerable families in Liverpool in the run-up to Christmas.

As has been said, the main reason people are referred to food banks in Liverpool is benefit delays and changes. The Trussell Trust has repeatedly warned that changes to benefits are forcing people to turn to food banks. One in three working-age social housing tenants in Liverpool who receive housing benefit has been affected by the bedroom tax, and there is no doubt that that has pushed many into hardship. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree said, the city council last year undertook a cumulative impact assessment of more than 20 major changes made to working-age benefits since 2010. I urge the Government to work with Liverpool City Council and other local authorities to ensure that we have the most up-to-date information about the appalling cumulative impact of welfare reforms, including universal credit.

The other reason for people being referred increasingly to food banks, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said, is low income. Yes, unemployment has fallen, but in my constituency and the rest of Liverpool it is consistently above the national average, and for many people who are in work, that work does not pay enough for them to get by. Much of the increase in employment is insecure and low paid.

I have seen at first hand the fantastic work that food banks do in my constituency, and I pay tribute to their selfless and dedicated volunteers. In the year up to last month, the north Liverpool food bank provided food to more than 3,000 of my constituents, including almost 1,300 children. That represented a 10% increase on the previous year. Once a month I volunteer at the north Liverpool food bank at St John’s church in Tuebrook in my constituency. I was there last Saturday. In September we helped 137 people. While I was there I talked about the debate we are having today, and we discussed issues I might raise. The two main points that came out of the discussion, including with the vicar, were the increase in use during the several years that the food bank has been at St John’s, and the change in the profile of the people who come to it. There are still many single people—mostly men—but increasingly there are families with children. Some are people in low-paid work, and some are waiting for benefits.

I also want to pay tribute to a food bank in another part of my constituency. At Dovecot food bank there is concern about the unseen numbers of people not receiving...
the support they might need. The food bank has been working with local schools to identify vulnerable families and ensure that support is available to them. One of the most disturbing trends that is identified is having to serve food to hungry children because their families cannot afford to feed them. Most schoolchildren in Liverpool are enjoying the half-term holiday this week, but for many low-income families school holidays represent financial stress, hunger and even malnourishment, because of the absence of free school meals. Croxteth Gems was originally set up to provide play and youth services, but increasingly over the past few years the people there have been serving food to hungry children because their families cannot afford to feed them. During the school holidays, Croxteth Gems hosts a play scheme, including a free breakfast and lunch for the children. Sometimes they serve food to almost 100 hungry local children.

The charity Feeding Britain, set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), has established local pilot areas for programmes that provide free meals and activities for children during school holidays. Earlier this year the Government provided £2 million of funding for families to benefit from free healthy meals and activities in the summer holidays. That meant that organisations such as Feeding Britain could reach many more families. It was welcome, but it was a modest step in the right direction. I take the opportunity today to urge the Government to increase the funding provided to those programmes, so that no children should go hungry in the holidays—particularly the long summer holidays—simply because they do not have access to free school meals.

I want to say something about education, and will echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) said. More than 32,000 children in Liverpool are growing up in poverty. Education has a central role to play if we are to achieve a fairer society with less inequality and tackle poverty. Like my colleagues, I pay tribute to the city council for keeping children’s centres open despite austerity. Good-quality early education has a big impact on children’s development.

An area of controversy at the moment is the Government’s potential plans for nursery schools. There are two fantastic nursery schools in my constituency—Ellergreen and East Prescot Road. Both were judged outstanding by Ofsted, but at both there is concern about long-term funding. I know that the Minister responding to the debate is not an Education Minister, but I seek assurances from the Department for Education that the concerns of nursery schools in Liverpool and across the country are being listened to. Those schools equip children, often in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods, with the education and skills they need to have the best chance later in life.

Schools need to know that they have reliable funding so that they can offer the best quality education. There is concern in Liverpool, as there is in many parts of the country, that once the national funding formula is adopted it could disadvantage schools in our city. I implore the Government to ensure that such factors as deprivation, pupil mobility and prior attainment are at the heart of the national funding formula.

Finally, on further education, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside said, equipping young people aged 16—and adults—with the skills they need is vital. Last week there was a Love our Colleges campaign lobby of Parliament. I met the principal of Myerscough College, who told me about the great work it is doing, and that it faces tough financial circumstances. Investment in FE would make a big difference in tackling poverty in Liverpool. I hope that the Minister can take that message back to his colleagues at the Department for Education.

3.28 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on her excellent speech; she set out everything that the city faces, from cuts to local authorities, the hostile environment on benefits and the personal experiences that we come across in our surgeries every week, as well as the evidence in report after report. The Government seem determined to turn a blind eye to those reports and doubt their veracity, and I find it shocking when the Minister shakes his head, when we see such experiences every day.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): I was not shaking my head.

Dan Carden: You were during my hon. Friend’s speech. The experiences I am talking about are things we see every day in Liverpool.

I was elected for the first time last year, to represent a Liverpool constituency, and it is an incredible privilege. When I am asked what the biggest issue facing my constituency is, I say poverty—and it is, because that is the critical issue affecting people, in their long-term health, educational outcomes, job opportunities, living standards and mental health. Most of all, it affects their sense of self-worth. That is the most hurtful part of seeing the decline in our communities. As my hon. Friends have done, it is right to put on the record how proud Scousers are, and how strong our communities are. That is shown by the work that our community centres and food banks do day in, day out. Liverpool is an astonishing city that is doing well in many respects.

This debate set me thinking about what poverty is, and what we are talking about today. If we look back in history, we see different types of poverty. I have seen individuals fall into poverty—people can lose a job, be moved on, and then perhaps another job appears, and during that time, trade unions and charities may help out. Families also fall into poverty. My family was affected by unemployment. My dad was unemployed for seven years, and sometimes it felt as if we did not have much money when we were growing up. Nevertheless, we had a family unit, we had a community and we had support. We still had good schools and public services, the local authority did its bit, and there were youth facilities. Today we are talking about whole communities being pushed into poverty while the safety net is withdrawn from the bottom.

Poverty is man-made. It does not exist in a vacuum; it is the result of decisions made by the powerful. No one person is responsible for their own poverty. Austerity is and has been a political choice, not an economic necessity. Since 2010 this Government have handed out an eye-watering £110 billion in tax giveaways for the biggest corporations and the super-rich, paid for by devastating
cuts to wages, living standards and essential public services for the rest. They have starved our schools of funding—something they deny—taken police off our streets, including 1,000 from Merseyside Police, and left our NHS and social care in crisis.

Not only have the cuts themselves been political, but so too has their distribution. New research from the University of Cambridge shows that post-industrial cities in the north of England have been hit by the deepest cuts to local government spending and that, on average, Labour councils have been hit four times harder than Tory councils. Few places have been hit harder than Liverpool, with the staggering 64% cut to local authority funding that we have heard about. Conservative Members tell us not to fear because the Prime Minister announced at the Tory party conference that austerity is over. Leaving aside the fact that we have heard such empty rhetoric three times before, I assure the Minister that the reality on the streets of Walton and across Liverpool tells a different story as austerity rolls on, piling misery on our communities.

We have already heard many of the statistics, so I will not repeat them all. Average wages in Liverpool are £11,000 below the national average, and 40% of children in my constituency are growing up in poverty. Liverpool is now classed as having the second-highest levels of destitution of any city in the UK. On top of that, this Government now heap universal credit—a policy so fundamentally flawed that it has become an exemplar of institutional incompetence. [Interruption.] I think I heard the Minister tut, but this is being played out on our streets, and we see the evidence in report after report. Perhaps he will respond to some of the points raised today, including the Trussell Trust’s report, which states that demand for food banks has soared by 52% in areas of universal credit roll-out, compared with 13% in other areas.

Housing associations, letting agents and private landlords have told me that tenants are falling into rent arrears in areas such as Bootle and elsewhere where the roll-out has gone ahead, and that evictions will increase. The calamitous roll-out in my constituency comes right before Christmas, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was right to call for it to be delayed, at least until after the Christmas month, when we know it will cause increased hardship. The figures are stark, but they do not do justice to the human misery that I already deal with in my casework under the existing benefits system.

Under this Conservative Government, we are being hurtled backwards to bygone days, reminiscent of when it was a crime to be poor. The Government’s welfare reforms have seen hundreds of millions of pounds sucked out of Liverpool’s local economy. The benefit freeze, in reality it is not a “freeze” but a real-terms cut for millions of low-income families—has meant a loss of £45 million for households in Liverpool. We have heard about the cumulative effect of such cuts.

Given the pressures, some people have to give up employment to care for elderly relatives. A social worker came to my constituency office and explained that he has had to give up good, well-paid employment because the care is not there for his elderly mother. We have heard how the local authority already has to act as a sticking plaster, which shows that the current benefits system is failing. I want to congratulate the Mayor and the local authority on their work.

Next week the Chancellor will reveal the Government’s Budget, and we will no doubt have a debate about economic growth and the judicious of figures to mask deep systemic problems in our economy. Not only have we seen the worst decade for wages in centuries, but the UK is the only advanced economy in which wages have continued to fall, even when the economy is growing. That is because, of a decades-long trend of the share of gains from growth going increasingly towards profit, not wages. More and more economists tell us the blindingly obvious: having money from economic growth flow to working people and the poor rather than to the rich would stimulate better rates of economic growth and lower unemployment. As income inequality increases, the potential for economic growth is constrained. Since the 1970s, while productivity and the economy kept growing, the average worker’s pay package did not. The Financial Times has stated that since 2007, the UK was the only big advanced economy in which wages contracted while the economy expanded. In most other countries, including France and Germany, both the economy and wages have grown...the UK sits on its own as a rich economy that experienced a strong economic performance while the real wages of its workers dropped.” What does economic growth matter to my constituents if it does not even reach them?

We have heard reports that the Chancellor is considering bringing back regional pay in the Budget in order to deny pay rises to our constituents on a national pay scale. Can the Minister tell us anything about that, and can I urge him to feed back that it would be an absolute disaster for the regions of the country if the Chancellor were to go anywhere near the idea?

The Government’s cuts have not tackled the deficit; they have shifted it on to local authorities and public services, plunging them into crisis, while starving our economy of the patient, long-term investment it needs to thrive. The problems are so stark that the solutions must be radical. The people of Liverpool do not need piecemeal change; they need something much bigger. That is why the next Labour Government will not be satisfied with tinkering around the edges of a rigged economy; they will transform our economy so that it works in the interests of the ordinary people I represent.

3.38 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on securing this important debate.

Liverpool is a place I have got to know well, like many others who have spoken today. Part of my constituency lies within the Liverpool city region, and many of my constituents travel in or visit Liverpool each day. Many—including my wife—have recent personal or family heritage in Liverpool, and people are well aware of what colleagues have already noted. Liverpool is a city with incredible culture, buildings, beauty—Scouse pride, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) pointed out—and history. It is also a city that has places that are suffering deep and scarring poverty and, disgracefully, 32,000 children are living in poverty. That poverty is made even
worse by the Government’s austerity measures, and it looks set to deepen further as a result of the roll-out of universal credit across the city and region.

This afternoon we have heard many examples and arguments for why the roll-out of universal credit must be halted and the policy radically reformed and fixed. We heard many more in the main Chamber last week—in fact, we have heard many over the past few months. Of course, universal credit is not the sole cause or trigger of poverty—I will talk about some of the other causes later—but it is certainly not scaremongering to suggest that rolling out universal credit across Liverpool is likely to make the issues worse and the suffering even greater. There are many reasons why the Government should stop the roll-out, but surely the evidence that more people will be forced to use food banks—69,000 used them last year alone—simply to feed themselves and their children is reason enough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree said that people in Liverpool want jobs, skills and investment. They certainly do not want to root through bins for food and vital goods. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton rightly pointed out that austerity is a political choice, and that it is driving what we see on the streets of Liverpool. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) pointed out that only 16%—a stark figure—of young people aged 16 to 24 are in work. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) made a strong case that the end-of-austerity cheque should deal with the growth in food bank use and the decimation of public services in Liverpool. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) pointed out that this is a debate we really should not be having today—or on any day—and said that universal credit is exacerbating the crisis on the streets of Liverpool.

My question to the Minister is this. If the unacceptable delays, the growing rent arrears in Riverside and elsewhere, and the numerous tales of mistakes and misapplications are not enough to make the Government stop and think again, what will it take? It seems that the prospect of children going hungry in Liverpool and elsewhere is not enough to stop universal credit. That should shame the Minister, the Government and all of us in the fifth richest country in the world, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby said.

Of course, poverty is not caused solely by universal credit, although it often rises as a result. Good, well-paid, fulfilling and decent jobs can help to tackle poverty, and we have often heard Conservative Ministers talk about work being the best route out of poverty. The question, however, is, what kind of work? We hear lots of spin from the Government about jobs and employment, but beneath the headlines lies a story of insecurity, low pay and wages falling far short of decent expectations. Real-terms weekly pay is £11 a week lower than it was a decade ago. Business surveys suggest that there are 1.8 million people on zero-hours contracts in the economy, and almost 800,000 consider such posts to be their main job. The draconian cuts to in-work allowances from universal credit is a retrograde step. The National Audit Office says that there is no evidence that it leads to employment growth.

Having focused on what little the Government are doing to tackle poverty, I want to take the opportunity to welcome what Liverpool City Council and many other councils across the country are doing to blunt the ever sharper knife of Tory austerity and to support those in need. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree and others mentioned the work of Liverpool’s Labour Mayor, Joe Anderson. The Labour council and its city region Mayor are helping to tackle poverty. They have spent £12 million on services for homeless people, £3.5 million protecting 42,000 people from the full impact of Government reductions in council tax support, £2.7 million on almost 13,000 crisis payments to help people with the cost of food, fuel, clothing and furniture, and £2.2 million on 8,300 discretionary housing payments to people affected by welfare reform and hardship. They have set up a £2 million hardship fund that will run from 2017 to 2020 to help struggling residents. As has been rightly pointed out, all children’s centres remain open. There is a demand for real powers to transform the economy into one that offers high-quality, decent and fairly paid jobs—something that Whitehall control has so far failed to deliver.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton and for Garston and Halewood mentioned those actions in the main Chamber last week, and they are welcomed by all Members from Liverpool. Once again, it is left to our councils—usually, our Labour councils—to help those most in need. They have already faced draconian cuts—Liverpool’s budget has been cut by 64%, or £440 million, in a decade—and yet the Liverpool Mayor is still determined to tackle the root causes of this shocking poverty. Meanwhile, the Government have cut taxes for the richest and wealthiest businesses and corporations—a £11 billion giveaway.

We accept that eradicating poverty requires more than one approach. It requires many partners inside and outside Government. We also know that two key elements are fundamental to the approach: a genuine desire from the Government to do it and the willingness to prioritise that desire and make decisions to underpin it. The Government’s record show that they have neither.

Dan Carden: My hon. Friend will have heard the Government announce, over the summer, their intention to halve homelessness by the end of this Parliament and eradicate it by 2027. As charities that deal with homelessness and crisis said at the time, unless the Government deal with the problems in our economy and put together a cross-departmental strategy, the idea that they will ever get anywhere near that target is fanciful, because they are dealing only with the results, not the causes.

Mike Amesbury: My hon. Friend makes a very strong case and a fair point.

The Minister has heard my colleagues talk about the extent of poverty and its effect on Liverpool and elsewhere. He has heard the genuine fears that the Government’s current policy direction—their cuts to welfare, nurseries, schools, colleges and local government, and their disastrous approach to Brexit—will make that worse. He has heard about the inequality and the unfairness that people, families and children are suffering in Liverpool and places like it. Their lives and opportunities are defined by their postcode, rather than their talent, ambition and dreams. Will he now step back and listen to the reality of life in poverty from real people and real cases, look further than the spin of statistics about the jobs market and the economy, which far too many people see as a world away, and lobby the Chancellor?
The time to act is now. End the cuts that push people into poverty, the benefits freeze and the two-child cap. Stop the damaging, catastrophic roll-out of universal credit, which will make poverty worse in Liverpool and elsewhere. Restore the £3 billion-plus cut from the system made in 2015. Act now and fairly fund public services.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Streeter. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. I clearly do not agree with all the points they made—I am sure they will not agree with everything I am about to say—but it is crystal clear that every one of them is driven by a passion to protect the most vulnerable people in society. We all want the same result; we just disagree about how to get from A to B. I am conscious that hon. Members mentioned lots of different issues. I am merely a junior Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, so in the limited time I have got, I will try to cover the points about employment, income and poverty, universal credit migration and food banks. If time permits, I will also cover some of the other points that fall at least roughly within my area.

All speakers acknowledged that we have seen record employment, with 1,000 new jobs created every day, unemployment at record lows, and 964,000 fewer workless households. That is important because research statistics show that workless households are four times more likely to be in poverty. I will come to the specific points made during the debate about that.

Many of the speakers mentioned that there had been an increase in zero-hours contracts, for example. That is not the case: the number of zero-hours contracts actually fell by over 100,000 in the last year alone, and they represent only 2.4% of total employment, which is around the same level as under the last Labour Government.

Justin Tomlinson: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Luciana Berger: I have been reflecting on all the positive spin that the Minister is trying to put on various figures, but why then we are receiving a visit from the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in the next few weeks? Why is that person coming to this country to see the awful situation that we face?

Justin Tomlinson: We get reviewed as a signatory country and supporter of the UN’s work, and I will be speaking personally to the person coming.

Of the four current measures of poverty—relative, absolute, and before and after housing costs—three are lower than in 2010 and the other is the same. Those in poverty, who are the focus of this debate, are on average £400 better off in real terms than they were in 2010, while those in full-time work on the national living wage have seen a 7% real-terms increase in their income in the last two years alone. We have done that through a combination of increasing the national living wage—there are arguments about what the level should be, but I do not need to remind colleagues that the rate that we first set was higher than the one in the manifesto that Labour Members stood on in 2015—our income tax threshold, which has completely removed the lowest 3.6 million earners from paying income tax, which is worth £1,000 a year, and our extension of free childcare and other areas of support.

Let me turn to universal credit, which is very topical. One thing that surprised me was that nobody mentioned conversations with work coaches. I know that many Opposition Members have been to jobcentres—I have done my research and looked at their Twitter feeds. As a constituency MP—I have only recently been recalled as a Minister—I know that the work coaches on the frontline are very enthusiastic about the principle of universal credit. That does not mean that everything is right, but they are enthusiastic about it. For the first time, they can offer personalised and tailored support.

Luciana Berger: They are enthusiastic about it, but it is not working in my constituency.

Justin Tomlinson: I am conscious that hon. Members mentioned lots of different issues. I am merely a junior Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, so in the limited time I have got, I will try to cover the points about employment, income and poverty, universal credit migration and food banks. If time permits, I will also cover some of the other points that fall at least roughly within my area.

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Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Briefly, although I will not take too many interventions because I am conscious of time.

Maria Eagle: Can the Minister explain why 32% of those using the South Liverpool food bank said that the main reason they were doing so was low income?

Justin Tomlinson: As I said, I will come to food banks—a little patience, please.

We all recognise that getting people into work is important, but ultimately the question is whether it leads to real cash in their pockets. Research has shown that there are one million fewer people in absolute poverty—a record low—and 300,000 fewer children living in absolute poverty, but there is still more to do. While food insecurity has almost halved in the last five years alone—we are at 5.4%; the European average is 7.9%—there is still more to do.

Luciana Berger: I have been reflecting on all the positive spin that the Minister is trying to put on various figures, but why then we are receiving a visit from the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in the next few weeks? Why is that person coming to this country to see the awful situation that we face?
Minister is to represent them. I have seen in my casework, as a genuine local resident in my constituency, as the MP and, formerly, a councillor, that some people were overwhelmed by the legacy system. Under universal credit, they will have for the first time a named work coach who will stick with them throughout the process to ensure that they are not missing out. That does not mean that universal credit has been perfect—we have had many debates and there have already been many changes. In some cases, under tax credits and legacy benefits we had tax rates of 90%. I know that would please the Leader of the Opposition, but that is not what the decent public want. There were 16, 24 and 30-hour cliff edges, which created a barrier to people progressing in work. The legacy benefits were seeing £2.4 billion-worth of support missed. We cannot knowingly stand by and say, “We’ve got to stop universal credit,” because these are vulnerable people missing out on money.

We are conscious that we have had to make changes to the migration. We have always said that the roll-out of universal credit will be slow and steady—it is a “test and learn”. In last year’s autumn statement, we rightly announced that we would remove the seven-day waiting list, a welcome change that was called for by a cross-party campaign.

A lot of the cases brought up involve people who have not had access to money. We realised that people did not know that the system was not designed to provide advance benefits, so it is now a given that the work coach will push that information in the initial interview.

Anybody currently receiving housing benefit will now get two weeks of housing benefit in addition—no strings attached—which can then be used. We recognised that we should not presume in all cases that they should take full responsibility for paying their housing benefit, so we now offer, particularly where people’s housing benefit payments are sent directly to their landlords.

We have launched the Landlord Portal, which is very much welcomed by local government and housing associations, and we have protected the severe disability premium. In conjunction with the £3 billion-worth of transitional support in place, over one million disabled families will be on average £110 a month better off.

Mike Amesbury: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: No, I am sorry; I am running out of time. Severely disabled claimants will benefit from higher rates, ranging from £158 to £326. That is why hon. Members should think carefully about the unintended consequences of seeking political capital by calling for a stop to universal credit. Yes, lobby for improvements, but to stop it would be to deprive some of the most vulnerable people of support.

I am very short of time but I want to touch on food banks. I have met the Trussell Trust and have visited food banks as a constituency MP, a Minister and a councillor, and I have friends who work in food banks. I welcome the work of the football clubs in Liverpool in food collection; I went to see my local football club, Swindon Supermarine FC, which was doing a food bank collection last night. People use food banks for varying reasons, but if they are missing out on formal support, we must do something about that. I made a commitment to the Trussell Trust, with which I want to work closely—I am not precious. It is important that we help those vulnerable people, which could mean having a point of contact in every jobcentre so that if the volunteers spot someone who has been to the food bank first, they can then come to us. My commitment is to do all that we can for vulnerable people.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Luciana Berger has the final word.

3.59 pm

Luciana Berger: Thank you, Mr Streeter. I was not anticipating this opportunity, but I am grateful for it. I thank hon. Friends and colleagues for joining me and making representations—collectively, we have made a strong representation to the Minister—and I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for his remarks which, equally, elaborated on all remarks made.

We are talking about people—our constituents—who face misery every day. We sit here in a very different position to many of our constituents, who really struggle on a daily basis. I have reflected on the Minister’s remarks and I have captured some of the themes, but I am disappointed that he did not specifically respond to the experience in Liverpool—he gave national figures, but no figures specific to what is happening in Liverpool. He did not acknowledge the prevalence of various different forms of precarious employment—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).
Regulation of Materials used in Notice Boards

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

4 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,That this House has considered regulation of materials used in notice boards.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and to see the Minister and her Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), in their places. If nothing else, more people have asked me about this debate than about any other Adjournment debate I have had in this place—I have had a few in my time—so I shall explain. I do not expect the Minister to answer all the points I make, but I am sure that she will read the debate subsequently and we can do something about it. However, I am grateful to have secured the debate, even though the title is rather delphic.

The subject came to my notice because a business in Stroud that makes notice boards from recycled materials came to see me. Although this is at one level a trade matter—I shall not mention the business by name, for obvious reasons—at another level it is more than that, involving safety, competition and fairness. I shall concentrate on two areas: first, the safety regulation of notice boards; and secondly, the implications for small businesses, particularly in my constituency.

Notice boards are everyday things. They are in almost every building, can be purchased in so many different ways and are relatively cheap, so people do not think a lot about them. When shopping online, the important product information is frequently so unimportant that it would not hold a consumer’s interest for long. Nevertheless, notice boards are subject to safety considerations. In the case of fire safety, post Grenfell we certainly know about some of the implications. I do not suggest that Grenfell was anything other than a tragedy; today we are talking about something of much smaller import, but the inside of buildings still matters as much as the external fire safety issues.

What drew my attention to the subject, and why I feel so strongly, is that the materials that some companies use to make notice boards are also, in other contexts, advertised as firelighters. Something that we would want to be safe and secure is also available to people to set fire to, in a completely normal way, as a firelighter. That really drew my attention.

In the United Kingdom, all wall linings—including notice boards—fitted to public buildings must conform to one of two standards: the European BS EN 13501, class D; or the national BS 476, parts 6 and 7, class 3. I understand, however, that the majority of notice boards fitted in schools are made from a material that meets the lower European standard, class E. Again, the manufacturers of the material note that it has a supplementary use, as a firelighter, which is bizarre, to put it mildly.

In addition, research shows a substantial difference in fire spread between the highest and lowest-performing materials on the market. I want the Government to take note of that, because all such materials should be as fire-proof as possible. The EN 13501 standards measure the fire index growth rate—FIGRA, to use the more acronymic description—and tests indicate that non-fire-rated materials can have FIGRA values of 500% of their fire-rated equivalents. In other words, the notice boards can be set on fire very quickly, and they will burn.

Notice boards sold online are not only vague on standards and descriptions, but sold in the same category as fire-tested boards tagged as school supplies. In other words, there is no discrimination between the different types of board, even though in my opinion there should be. For consumers shopping online for their classroom, such vital differences are in essence hidden—they have to know what they are dealing with. There is a clear concern about that because schools and others are faced with cuts—even though austerity is now over—and they tend to look at what is cheapest and most readily available. Safety measures, however, can be compromised by cost and availability—the cheaper substitutes are available online, with all the usual people we know about, whether shopping in convenience stores or, more particularly, online.

The task of eradicating all flammable materials in schools would be exceptionally hard, if not impossible, but the particular danger presented by notice boards is that their primary method of fire spreading is with a convection current. According to the 2006 fire safety risk assessment for educational premises, fire spread by convection is the most dangerous type of fire spread and is the cause of the highest number of injuries and deaths.

The most recent fire statistics from the Home Office show that since 2010 more than 4,100 fires have occurred in primary and secondary schools in England, which is more than 500 a year. Most of those are preventable fires. According to the most recent Local Government Association research report on the impact of fires in schools, there is usually a higher number of fires than 500, but they are not always reported as full-scale ones. Also, metropolitan areas tend to have a higher number of incidents, and a third of all school fires start during school time, which is particularly concerning. People studying and the staff may be affected, perhaps by inhaling whatever is burning. That in its own way is a high risk, and some 90,000 children a year are affected by school fires.

I am concentrating on schools, because obviously they are one of the biggest users of notice boards. The notice boards that fail to meet fire safety standards end up not only in highly populated public buildings such as schools, but in nursing homes. My staff carried out some quick and dirty research in nursing homes in Stroud and, to their alarm, they found that many of the boards that had been bought were not of a fire-proof standard.

That is a cause of serious concern because, according to the Home Office’s 2017 fire statistics, people over the age of 80 are almost three times more likely to die in a fire than people under 80. According to the statistics, between 2010 and 2018 there have been nearly 3,500 fires in nursing homes in England. If dangerous materials keep making their way into those buildings, we can only expect casualty numbers to rise. As the UK has an ageing population, we must be extra careful to have the right procedures to protect people.

In addition to the public health aspect, the lack of regulation has resulted in unfair competition for local and small businesses—the company in my constituency...
being a classic example, because its materials are fire-proof and therefore more expensive. The Minister should not ignore loopholes for the sake of shortcuts in the market that might have life-threatening consequences.

Small businesses continue to struggle against large companies that sell non-compliant and often dangerous products online. The owner of another Stroud-based business, when asked about this, said:

“I am not against fair competition and indeed I believe businesses thrive on it, provided the rules are the same for all. Goods supplied from non-UK/EU operators can more easily evade safety and other compliance regulations as well as in some cases, VAT”—we shall leave the VAT issue to one side—

“Of even greater concern is the potential danger from such products, whose manufacturer or supplier is outside the jurisdiction of the UK market surveillance authorities”.

An example is given in a recent study by the UK Lighting Industry Association that showed that of six domestic light fitting parts purchased at random through that model, five posed a real threat of electric shock. In that case, the fulfilment house claimed that responsibility for compliance and safety lay with the overseas supplier, not the fulfilment house. If that is correct, it means there is little to prevent those products from entering the UK market and posing a risk to consumers. Meanwhile, businesses that invest in premises and manufacturers from which we collect VAT are unable to compete on a level playing field.

The purpose of my speech is to ask the Minister to investigate, to ensure that safety is of prime concern and that there is a level playing field in the way in which materials are made available, particularly for public buildings. They should be properly advertised, safe and meet all the proper conditions that we would expect them to be subject to. In preparing for this debate, I wrote to the Education and Skills Funding Agency, to draw its attention to how schools provide their notice boards—largely on a cost basis—so that it takes account of whether those notice boards are fire resistant.

I have some specific suggestions for the Minister, which she may not be able to respond to now but hopefully she can look into them. The Building Bulletin 100 design guidance should be updated to require all boards to be fitted in schools to be fire safe to European BS EN 13501 class B standard or national equivalent; the cost impact is relatively low. I will not go through the complicated figures but the difference is not huge, although it is substantial for the businesses that are trying to compete. Companies must promote clear advertising to avoid confusion and potential danger, particularly for schools but also nursing homes and other public bodies, labelling what the safety requirements imply.

Lastly, school fire risk assessment guidelines should be updated to ensure that existing boards are checked and brought into conformity with the building regulations—at a minimum, fire safe to BS EN 13501 class D standard or national equivalent—within an appropriate time period. At the moment, I am more interested in going forward, but there is a level of safety checking that needs to be done retrospectively. I will be interested to hear what the Minister proposes.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and not to be grilled by you this afternoon. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for securing this debate—people often pronounce my constituency incorrectly as Rochester and Stroud, so it is nice to respond to the hon. Member for Stroud this afternoon.

I am pleased to speak in a debate about safety. This Government take product and consumer safety incredibly seriously. Government’s first duty is to guarantee the safety of their citizens. In my role as Minister I focus on product safety and standards, an area that I have a particular interest in, having spent my life dealing with products for sale on the market prior to joining the House of Commons.

I will give the hon. Gentleman an update on where the Government are. In January, the Government launched the Office for Product Safety and Standards, to deliver the highest level of protection for consumers and to build confidence in our regulatory system. In August, the office published its strategy for product safety, detailing how it will achieve its goals. It now has in place a dedicated intelligence unit that assesses information from a variety of sources to monitor trends and identify potentially unsafe products on the market. With a £12 million funding upgrade, it now has an operational budget of £25 million a year.

In March, in partnership with the British Standards Institution, the office published the first Government-backed code of practice on product recalls. We have trained more than 300 trading standards officers to identify products and implement that code. That means that we will be better prepared to deal with product safety incidents and support manufacturers in preparing for potential incidents.

The Government are determined to be a world leader in how we deal with regulatory frameworks. A couple of weeks ago I was at the international regulatory delivery conference, which hosted professionals from more than 60 countries. That is an example of the things that we will continue to do to be leaders in this field.

The hon. Gentleman raises concerns about the safety of notice boards in particular. The points he makes are extremely important; he rightly points out that boards can be found in schools, hospitals, doctors’ surgeries, university halls of residence and workplaces up and down the country. It is vital that products of that kind are safe and remain safe. By law—under the General Product Safety Regulations 2005—manufacturers have a responsibility to put only safe products on to the market. That applies to any product that is intended for or likely to be used by a consumer, including where the product was originally intended for professional use. Products must be safe for any reasonable foreseeable use and the materials used must also be safe.

Furthermore, where manufacturers or distributors identify a safety issue with a product that is already on the consumer market, they must take action, which may, where appropriate, include a recall. If notice boards are for sale only to businesses or public bodies for use at
work, they will be caught by the Consumer Protection Act 1987, which applies to all consumer products and products used in the workplace. It places liability for any damage caused by an unsafe product firmly on the producer or importer. The Health and Safety Executive also has a role in ensuring that workplaces are safe. I am aware that a number of universities have banned the use of notice boards or otherwise restricted their use. My understanding is that that is due chiefly to the fact that in the event of a fire, notice boards hold a lot of paper and therefore present a risk.

The hon. Gentleman has a keen interest in schools, which formed a major part of his speech. Having also been a teacher for many years, I am sure we agree that schools must be a safe place for all pupils, teachers and visitors. It was quite shocking to hear his statistics about the number of fires that have taken place. There are already strong protections in place: all schools must follow strict fire safety regulations, including a fire risk assessment that is designed to ensure that they are as safe as possible and well prepared in the event of a fire. In addition, all new school building projects must comply with building regulations, including on fire safety. That is independently checked by building control or other such inspectors before buildings are occupied.

The hon. Gentleman referred to fire safety; the horrific and tragic fire at Grenfell last year was a shocking and terrible event. It is right that the Prime Minister ordered the full public inquiry, which is now under way, in the aftermath of the fire in response to concerns raised about the external cladding on tower blocks. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government commissioned Dame Judith Hackitt to conduct an independent review of the regulatory system for buildings and fire safety. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is responsible for the safety of building products and is leading on the Government’s response. In a statement in the House following the publication of the review, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made clear the Government’s support for the principles outlined in the report.

Dr Drew: I am sure they will write to you.

Kelly Tolhurst: Yes—that would be good. The Government will continue to do all we can to deliver the highest levels of consumer and product safety, and to use trading standards to combat illegal products that come on to the market. I thank the hon. Gentleman again.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm
Sitting suspended.
Coalfield Areas: Sports Facilities

4.30 pm

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that this is an hour-long debate and the Minister has protected time. The Front Benchers have five minutes each and the Minister has 10 minutes.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sports facilities in coalfield areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. The purpose of the debate is to highlight the importance of properly funding and managing local sports facilities in former mining areas, and particularly to talk about the potential of miners’ welfare as a community hub and asset. It is great to see so many colleagues from all parts of the House present here.

Many community sports facilities in coalfield towns were built by British Coal and have since been handed over to the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, a national charity supporting former miners and their families with help and advice on disability, ill health and financial hardship; the organisation has responsibility for miners’ welfare. There are about 250 recreational charities still operating as independent welfare and an additional 425 where a municipal authority acts as the trustee. In some communities, these facilities are the only remaining social and sporting amenities available for public use.

Some centres have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of their local communities; some trustees run very successful football clubs, while others run bowling greens and other facilities, for example. Unfortunately, many have not been successfully run and their buildings and sports grounds have been run down. I am concerned that those facilities are not receiving the investment required to maintain them to a decent standard.

There are several local clubs that I would like to mention, but I will stick to two key ones, although there are many others like them across Mansfield, north Nottinghamshire, and the rest of the country, all linked to former collieries. The first is Welbeck Lions football club, in Meden Vale, which is located at the old miners’ welfare and provides sporting facilities to one of the most deprived communities in the region. It has eight senior and two adult teams, with a further three in development, and has been proactive in forming positive plans for future expansion. I have hosted a meeting for it with the Football Association and other supportive organisations.

The club and its volunteers provide an invaluable service to the local community. The club is keen to grow and expand, but improving its playing surfaces is a priority. It also needs floodlit pitches, which are required to allow the senior team to compete at a higher level and the under-19s to play in a midweek floodlit league. It has an array of further issues: the sports pavilion only has one toilet and cannot meet modern regulations, and security is a concern, with vandalism and pitches plagued by dog fouling. The young people who engage with the Welbeck Lions are often from deprived backgrounds. Statistics show that Meden Vale, where the club is based, is among the poorest communities in Nottinghamshire, and the positive impact that sports facilities have on the lives of local people should not be underestimated.

The second is Forest Town Arena, formerly the welfare and now home to AFC Mansfield. It is still a focal point for the community in Forest Town and a venue for all sorts of local events. There has been good management and investment, and the result is a nice facility; it shows what can be done, and what more could be done, with the right support and co-ordination. The community spirit that once held mining communities together is very much still there, whatever the Labour party’s political broadcasts might suggest. The organisations that kept people together have evolved and some have moved on, but in some areas the pubs and social clubs that used to be the centre of life have disappeared, and coalfield communities are left with often run-down community facilities and a lack of funding and support for sports provision.

A 2008 report by the Audit Commission stated that social regeneration had been the least successful component of regeneration in the coalfields. In 2010, the Department of Health commissioned a report that sought to look at health inequalities in coalfield communities, which raised concerns about whether the previous emphasis on economic regeneration came at the cost of health and social projects. The report stated that the health behaviours of men, women and children in those areas were often characterised by poor statistics around smoking, alcohol, poor diet and nutrition, coupled with inactivity. Unfortunately, it is increasingly clear that the facilities needed to support more exercise and activity are not up to scratch in many of those communities.

More recently, the benefits for mental health of participating in sport have been established. Studies have shown that sport can improve mood, decrease the chances of depression and anxiety and ensure a more balanced lifestyle. Again, we see higher levels of long-term mental health problems across the age range in coalfield communities compared with the rest of the country as a whole. Sports facilities are not just important for locally well established teams and aspiring world-class sportsmen; they offer a wide range of benefits, including improving the health of younger and older people and creating positive opportunities for socialising.

The new community focus criterion of Sport England could be hugely beneficial for areas such as Meden Vale, Warsop or Mansfield, if that sport could be focused on bringing welfare back to life as a community hub for health, sport, social activities and even the provision of services. In Warsop, where they have unfortunately recently lost a leisure centre, a community hub based around a welfare that could bring all those things back together would be life-changing for many people in the community. It is more cost-effective than an expensive new building and could be done in some of the areas of most need, where activities already take place.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust has supported projects in coalfield areas and helped to respond to the threat of closure of outdoor sports facilities such as pitches, playing fields and pavilions. The trust has invested millions of pounds in sports facilities in England such as multi-use games areas and 3G or AstroTurf facilities. One of the trust’s current priorities is health and wellbeing, and I am pleased that sport features heavily in its work. In 2006, it undertook a comprehensive review of sport
and recreational facilities across coalfields, which provided details of facilities that were available to coalfield communities prior to the financial crash.

It would be helpful if the Government supported the trust to update that database and review which facilities remain and which are no longer available. For those facilities that are no longer in use, I would be particularly keen to learn how they were disposed of and what reinvestment was made in the communities when those facilities were lost. If land was sold, where did the money go?

As well as the grants that Sport England provides, dozens of national governing bodies award funding packages, as do local authorities, but trustees of coalfield facilities often do not have the experience to apply for those grants. It is also the case that many applications have conditions covering things such as minimum participation, which can be difficult. Once established, helping to bring different teams, clubs and other community organisations together under one roof in a welfare-based community hub could help to facilitate bidding for and winning investment to make the centres self-sustaining in future.

As I mentioned at the beginning, coalfield communities are often in a slightly unusual position in that many of their community centres and local sports facilities have a background in the coal industry rather than being built and maintained by local authorities. Since the transfer of miners' welfare clubs and community facilities to CISWO, facilities such as football pitches and bowling greens have often not been looked after effectively. In my former role as a district councillor I was involved, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), in a campaign on Bestwood Miners' Welfare, which has been affected by ongoing issues surrounding its management and the maintenance of its facilities. I am keen that the Government look at how local authorities and sporting bodies can be encouraged to work with CISWO on local sports and health and wellbeing priorities in order to support such communities.

In my experience, CISWO is not always the best at facilitating effective management of the facilities and ensuring that they are looked after. It works hard to support former miners and their families and provides important assistance to those individuals, but I am concerned that, in prioritising the individuals rather than the long-term community legacy, it is allowing facilities to become run down and in some cases turning a blind eye to poor management, which is detrimental to communities.

Money raised from community buildings seems often to be invested in other priorities of the organisation and to be put back into the community it came from. That is not happening only in Nottinghamshire; I know that in Yorkshire there have been similar problems. The Yorkshire Post ran an interesting story about recreation grounds in mining communities last year. I fear that CISWO's strategic decision to focus on former miners as individuals rather than on communities, while perhaps understandable at one time, is now increasingly to the detriment of those communities.

The good news is that in Mansfield and Warsop, and across many other mining towns, there are facilities that still exist and space available for sports amenities. I am not asking the Government to commit to funding a series of brand-new facilities. It is often cheaper to refurbish and improve current facilities, with some help. I am convinced that some money already exists within a number of external organisations that could be utilised in this way.

I am keen to highlight that improving sports provision in coalfield communities will not take huge resources. I want Ministers to consider a small injection of funding to support coalfield areas in improving sports provision, which will improve health and wellbeing and rebuild social cohesion. However, it is just as important to get the political will behind improving facilities, and the Government should look at ways to encourage CISWO, local authorities and sporting bodies to work together to improve sports grounds. For the most part, facilities have willing groups of trustees and volunteers, so the main challenges are getting them to work together, giving them the skills and getting CISWO to release funding, along with support from national sports governing bodies.

As I touched on earlier, Sport England helps many communities with health and wellbeing programmes, looking at ways to support community assets and to provide multiple services from one facility. Miners' welfare clubs and sports grounds in coalfield communities have traditionally been used for a range of purposes, and I hope that Sport England sees the potential of many of those facilities as hubs for multiple services. That would also tie in with its work with deprived communities.

Sport England's funding programmes, such as Inspired Facilities and Protecting Playing Fields, are helpful, but I would like to see a specific focus on coalfield communities and protecting the facilities that currently exist in those areas. As a Government, we should aim to prove that we are committed to supporting coalfield communities, to advancing the cause of some of the country's most deprived areas and to genuinely be about helping the “just about managing” to have a better quality of life.

At the end of 2015, the Government published “Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation”, which emphasised the importance of harnessing sport for social good. It was a positive publication and a step in the right direction, and the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that the Government would “target funding at groups which have traditionally had lower participation rates”.

That includes places that are less active and less healthy, and coalfield communities generally top the charts in those statistics. Coalfield communities are generally some of the most deprived in the UK, with poorer
health outcomes and lower levels of physical activity. I hope that Ministers look to coalfield communities when considering their duty to ensure that absolutely everyone can benefit from sport, because, as the report notes, “the biggest gains and the best value for public investment is found in addressing people who are least active.”

I thank the Minister for her attendance, and hope she will be able to address some of my questions. I also hope to hear positive contributions from Members from across the House. I thank hon. Members for their time.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that I will call the first Front-Bench spokesperson at 5.10 pm.

4.41 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for securing this timely debate. I represented part of his constituency until the boundary changes of 2010, so I know Warsop and Welbeck extremely well. I recall the work that I and my office put in to get the initial significant grants to bring Meden Vale’s playing fields up to any kind of reasonable standard, but that was the beginning of the process, not the end. In former mining communities such as Meden Vale, with the level of enthusiasm and the number of volunteers there, it is fairly obvious to me that the Government are sitting on a health gold mine.

CISWO, with its legacy from the coal industry, is responsible for more playing fields in England than any other single organisation—a phenomenal fact. However, it has never taken that responsibility seriously. It has never had a plan. I have had many battles with it, even over basics such as getting investment in. That contrasts totally with the less well funded Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which has done and still does a superb job with meagre resources; it has pennies where pounds are needed. Its approach has been absolutely to the point in terms of recognising the economic and health benefits of investment, including in sporting facilities. The hon. Gentleman was right to highlight the important role that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust still plays. It could do more with more resource.

I am interested in the possibilities around CISWO and its land. The CISWO land in my area includes land in Harworth, a former colliery. It has cricket and football clubs. There was also provision for weightlifting and archery—Olympic sports. It was given £43,000 for floodlights, so that the football club, which has been very successful, can be promoted. The colliery is good at raising its own money, but it has never had any significant outside investment, only small amounts.

The land is there, and one of the Football Association’s multi-purpose, floodlit, full-size 3G or 4G pitches could be put there instantly, losing no facility whatsoever. It has a car park and changing rooms. It has the infrastructure. It has the community involvement, including among kids, and, critically, it has the volunteers. This is low-overhead sport. It does not require paying loads of people to do loads of things; it is volunteer-led. That kind of investment there would work. However, those volunteers are not the kind of people who have spent their time learning the routes to bid for various sums of money, so the money goes elsewhere, and they continue to spend their time running mass-participation events.

Costhorpe does not have any infrastructure. It has the fields, although it gave them over to the district council, and it has the cricket pitch. It lost its tennis facilities, and the bowling pitch, which is highly successful, although the land is still there. However, there are no changing rooms, so kids playing football have to change in cars. There are no toilets, although the youth club is sometimes open to give that generous assistance. Again, it is pretty simple and pretty basic: any plan for sport—or for football, which is the biggest sport played there—would have that automatically built in. Football bodies, with their mass wealth, are not doing that.

There is also Manton. I actually employed a member of staff, Kamini Patel, who spent three years battling with CISWO to allow investment in the facilities there. We pooled our money, Sport England money and various other types of money and put in changing rooms and a little multi-use games area. It was transformed from virtually nobody using it—one club, one football team—to thousands of kids using it, and thousands of girls playing football there. That continues to this day. It has decent changing rooms, decent toilets, a proper, safe car park, safe access and a little tuck shop room to make teas and coffees.

An all-weather facility could be put in Manton and the numbers would dramatically increase again. It needs a bit of assistance to get that going. It could also do with infrastructure money for the boxing that is held there, which is only just legal in the building used for it. There is also athletics there, which is highly successful. We are talking about potential Olympic medal winners training in the summer on grass marked out at the miners’ welfare. That is not the standard that we should aspire to in this country.

It seems to me that there is a huge opportunity for the Minister and for the Government. The facilities, the land and the consent are there. CISWO is not a dynamic organisation, but it is not the irritable blocker that it was when I dealt with it five or 10 years ago, when it tried to block every single thing. It gave me plenty of grief simply because we wanted to turn drinking clubs into sports clubs for kids. That has now changed, and CISWO will not stand in the way, but it needs some pump-priming. It needs the Government to say that they will put in extra money if it opens up football, cricket or athletics facilities, but what should the Government’s price be for doing that?

My final point, Mr Owen, is the biggest and the most important, and the one you will be most interested in, as will the Minister, I am sure. Any Government funding should be conditional on putting the NHS in the middle. The Government should tell the NHS that it has to be part of this. We put some good money into Manton miners’ welfare, and you cannot move for the vast number of parents and grandparents watching young girls and boys play football there on a Saturday morning. It is a wonderful sight, and statistically it is the Football Foundation’s most successful ever project. I hope it is listening in and recognising that.

What if NHS involvement was one of the conditions? Doctors could recommend walking round the pitch three times for each grandparent. Reading University’s academic research suggests that that will probably add half a year to their life if they do it every time they watch their grandchild play football. Let us bring in a little bit of quantified active participation and literally
bring in NHS branding—force the NHS to think through using these facilities as part of its work. The key target group in Mansfield, Bassetlaw and other coalfield communities is the parents and grandparents watching their kids involved in physical activity. If what I have suggested is part of the deal, we will save the taxpayer a fortune. Three times walking round the pitch is quantified activity. We should say to those running the facilities, “It is part of your responsibility to get all the parents and grandparents doing it, because that is why we are putting the money in.”

That would be huge for the NHS. That is the little twist that I would build in. It would be transformative in coalfield communities. It would be great for mental health stuff and all the rest. Say to people, “Aye, go and have a drink if you want on a Saturday night, but these aren’t drinking clubs. They are sports clubs. As they have a drink if you want on a Saturday night, but these aren’t drinking clubs. They are sports clubs. As they were originally, so they are going to be again—a great national asset brought fully back into use.” What a chance for the Minister to be performing round the country and seeing great success in what she has done!

4.51 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on his passion and enthusiasm for the changes that we are seeking in coalfield communities.

Coalmining was a major industry in Ayrshire from the mid-1700s until the mid-1980s, which saw the last of the deep mines in Ayrshire—or the National Coal Board west area, as it was known. Today, the surface scars of the collieries are all but gone, leaving a unique landscape of pine forests, moors, lakes and recovered open-cast sites. There are also many sites of special scientific interest, and I am pleased to report that the area hosts an abundance of wildlife.

When the coalfields were thriving, sport and culture also thrived. Over the past 150 years some remarkably talented individuals, including musicians and sports personalities, in sports ranging from boxing to bowling—not least Bill Shankly, of football fame—have hailed from Ayrshire mining communities. Bill Shankly was born not quite in my constituency but in a neighbouring constituency, in a small village called Glenbuck. It produced a number of world-class footballers.

Sadly, many such villages have disappeared, but since the mines closed the communities have remained proud and resilient. In recent years, for example, members of the Dalmellington curling club have worked to reinstate the outside curling pond at Craiggavil—an outside curling pond in Scotland—and almost certainly using granite curling stones quarried on the island of Ailsa Craig, off the coast of my constituency. Moreover, the Dalmellington band—it is well worth going to hear it play; it does very well in competitions throughout the UK—is playing on after 150 years in the Doon Valley.

There is much evidence to suggest an unhappy correlation between lower indices of health and fitness, life expectancy and deprivation in former coalfield communities, and a great deal of evidence to suggest that sports facilities are an excellent means by which to improve that particularly bad situation. At the moment, a number of organisations are doing sterling work for the welfare of former coalfield communities. Locally, we have East Ayrshire Council, the East Ayrshire Coalfield Environment Initiative, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, to name but a few. Indeed, another local organisation, the Coalfield Communities Landscape Partnership—it aims to reconnect communities with the landscape by creating opportunities for leisure, tourism and, we hope, jobs—has recently secured £2.5 million of national lottery funding, which will do much to support its work.

There is, however, a danger of overlap, and although I am very much aware that elements of sport are a devolved matter, community health and wellbeing is a matter of UK-wide importance. In many communities, the loss of sports facilities such as games halls, golf courses and bowling greens has left a significant health gap. Will the Minister therefore consider whether, despite the devolved elements, a UK-wide approach, with some form of joint working between Governments and the various support organisations, might see increased efficiency in the improvement of existing sports facilities, and in some cases the construction of new ones in former coalfield communities UK-wide? I will just mention that the proposed UK prosperity fund might be a till that one could dip into to improve some of these facilities, which are much needed.

There is the potential to make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of these communities, which in the past have played an immense part in the success of industry throughout the UK. We have taken the deep-mine coal, we have taken the open-cast coal and, if that were not enough, we are now stealing the wind—for renewable energy—from these communities, particularly around the Doon Valley. I say to the Minister that it may be time to pay them back for what they have given to the United Kingdom.

4.55 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for raising this matter. The Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation has been mentioned. Its headquarters are in my constituency, and I have worked with it over many decades. I am referring to the work that it has done and continues to do for mining communities and individuals in those communities. Its core activity includes services to individual clients through the organisation’s personal welfare service. That includes advice, guidance, advocacy and grant assistance to former miners and their families. The organisation’s website states that it is its medium-term priority. Sadly, we all know that that medium-term priority will be lessening all the time, because there are not many ex-miners around now.

Obviously, it is a long time since the coalmines closed in some parts of my constituency and, as has been pointed out, what we have left, as a consequence, is many recreation grounds that were tied to the local colliery. When I was a miner in Maltby colliery, we used to pay a certain amount a week from our wages to the miners’ welfare field, which was there to assist with the different activities that took place. Providing support for mining charities acting within mining trusts and
preserving recreational facilities in former mining communities is difficult at this stage, but I believe very strongly that we should look after these facilities for current and future generations.

I have discussed individual projects with the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation. I sought to declare an interest. My grandson, 10-year-old Ted Barron, plays for Maltby Miners Welfare junior football club. His older brother used to play for them, but he plays for another club now. There is still a hive of activity in these ex-coalmining communities, but there are a lot of problems.

I will not talk about all the grounds—there are many in my area—but one has been empty for years and we have argued about redevelopment and getting some sporting activity back on to it. It is in a village called Dinnington, where my constituency office is. Through CISWO, we tried to get some movement on that many years ago. We have had problems with other grounds as well. It may be argued that personal fallouts have been an issue. The biggest issue we have had recently at Maltby—I am going to ask the Minister whether her Department can help in some way—concerns the local football team. There are many people there—there is bowling and cricket, and whippet racing is still an activity—I have not seen a human beat one yet, but anyway, it is still an activity that takes place. There is an issue about ground improvement. Because no miners work down Maltby colliery any more, nobody is paying money into the welfare scheme, and the bar takings are depleting by the day. The culture is changing. We have a situation that is potentially a serious threat.

There was a scheme involving the football club, called Maltby Miners Welfare. This year it was streamed in the first FA cup round playing Pontefract Collieries. Sadly, Pontefract Collieries won—I was at the match and saw it. But the main thing about that is that there was an attempt to get some improvements through the Football Foundation, but that was not possible because of the lease arrangements between CISWO, the local Miners Welfare trustees and the users themselves. There is constant debate about the costs.

There are football clubs peppered throughout south Yorkshire playing in major amateur leagues. The football clubs have abandoned those grounds and gone elsewhere. At Kiveton Park in my constituency the football club left about three years ago—it could not get one locally. The priority for CISWO is the issue of independent advice, which I accept is important, but I and others would like the legacy left by coalmining to carry on now, in terms of health and activity in our constituencies, especially given the levels of childhood obesity. I am not saying that they should necessarily get an NHS grant, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) says, but these clubs will need advice as they move into the future.

It is clear that CISWO has some assets in buildings and land. Its priority at the moment is to look after people who worked in the coal industry and their dependants, which I understand. In my view, it needs some advice about the future, so that we can get Football Foundation money to keep the recreation going, and to keep our young and elderly people fitter by using these facilities, which are a legacy from coalmining throughout the UK. I am sure that, with some assistance, CISWO would be the right organisation to do that.

5.1 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important and timely debate. I am pleased to follow the important and passionate contributions of hon. Members, which reflect a combined view across parties in this part of the world. I am a near neighbour of those who have spoken, except for my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who comes from north of the border but whose points were just as valid.

This issue is close to my heart. I did not have the privilege of being a miner, but both my grandfathers were miners and both of them effectively died from mining. I represent one of the pits that one of my grandads worked down, before he lost his leg and was retired. I have the privilege of representing lots of coalmining villages, including my own, which I lived in and my family have lived in for nearly 50 years. I know that the passion and community spirit is still there and I know how important it is to support that. I know the experience that has been discussed already. I have been to lots of the working men’s clubs and community facilities in these villages over the past few months, because I have been renting them out to hold public meetings and to talk to residents. Huge camaraderie and community spirit remains.

We will not debate this extensively, but it is fair to say that such places had the stuffing knocked out of them in the ’80s, and over the last 30 years or so they have got back on their feet and are moving again. Yet challenges remain, and it is places such as these where the community can still come together. Often some of these communities are somewhat isolated. I represent communities that are not that far away from the main town, Chesterfield, but actually most people look internally within that community—the bus routes are not great and not everybody has cars—because that is what people see and experience day to day. As a Government, we should think very hard about how we can support and improve this area.

There is some fantastic work already going on—I will name a few examples. I recently went to Tupton to talk to the local rugby club, which is doing fantastic work with the local community and is a real asset for the village. I have been to watch Eckington football club pull together dozens of young people every single week, to work in teams and learn to play football. Killamarsh Dynamos is doing the same in the next village. Last Friday evening I was at a local basketball club, Arrows Basketball in Dronfield, which operates across Dronfield, Yorkshire and Killamarsh. I have also seen Killamarsh Juniors, a club that is run to support local activities from a sports perspective. It has its own challenges, not least with npower—something I have been trying to help with over the past six months—which has put in four different smart meters and is getting different answers every time. I know that is slightly ancillary, but it demonstrates how close some of these clubs are to the bread line in supporting the activities they are doing. As a Government, we need to ensure that we recognise the important contribution that they make.

In my section of the party, I am somebody who believes in a small state and in Government only spending where it is necessary, rather than spending badly in lots of places. However, I am a strong supporter of infrastructure
spending, and this is social infrastructure. I can see from the places that I have the privilege to represent and the place where I have grown up how important these kinds of facilities are for the communities that we have been speaking about today. If there is something that we can do here, we should consider it strongly.

5.5 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen—in a different forum from our usual Wednesday morning standing engagement. I am conscious that the Division bells might ring in a moment, but I will keep the Chamber going until such time as we are interrupted.

I commend the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for securing and kicking off this excellent debate. We have heard excellent contributions from the hon. Gentleman himself; the hon. Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—who I will come back to in a moment—and for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), and the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron). I do not always agree with my friend, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. I did not agree with him—as hon. Members will have seen from my excessive gesticulation—when he suggested that we should have a UK-wide approach to spending on these matters, but I suspect that we shall have to disagree on that.

I am delighted to begin the winding-up speeches on behalf of the Scottish National Party. I want to refer to one or two initiatives in Scotland, as the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock did, before placing on the record my plea—not to the Minister, because this is a matter not for her but for my colleagues back home on Glasgow City Council—for some sports facilities in Glasgow East.

Before I do that, I want to pay tribute to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which receives financial backing from the Scottish Government in Edinburgh. Some £750,000 has been pledged to the trust this year to support the enabling of grassroots activity, which can tackle issues relating to employment, sport and training. We know the good work that the trust does and what it is delivering. It is what they were promised, and it is what we will deliver.

Crosshill, Barrachnie and Bredisholm, which developed as farming and weaving communities in the latter part of the 18th century. However, the opening up of the Monklands coalfield, with the construction of the Monklands canal and later the railway, stimulated the rapid growth of Baillieston. It soon acquired the typical character of a mining village, although some weaving survived until the end of the century, and we still have the last weavers’ cottage on Baillieston Main Street, which I am glad to see has been done up.

A continuous programme of pit sinking drew in workers from across Scotland and beyond, and the population grew rapidly to reach almost 4,000 by the time of the first world war. Of course, for reasons of politics, Baillieston does not have that mining industry now, but it is a radically different place. We once again have a growing population and the issues associated with that, and for that reason residents in that part of my constituency are quite right to say that they want proper amenities and facilities that reflect the dynamic and growing population that now lives in Baillieston and its surrounding communities. Since being elected, I have been working closely with my SNP colleague, Councillor Elaine Ballantyne, to apply maximum pressure to Glasgow City Council to make sure that the community gets what it was promised many years ago. A sports hub is what they were promised, and it is what we will deliver.

5.9 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, for what I believe is the first time. I thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for leading this debate. His constituency is directly affected by this important issue, which his predecessor was also concerned about.

One in 11 people in the UK live in coalfield sites, and as many hon. Members will know, coalfield sites fall well below the national average in most national indicators. My husband is from a little mining village in Wales, and we often talk about the challenges faced by people who live in such rural communities. Whether in employment rates, prevalence of ill health or life expectancy, coalfields have some of the worst statistics on deprivation in the UK. The 1980s miners’ strike may be a distant memory for some, but for residents in coalfields across the country, the job losses that came afterward have cast a long shadow. The Government of the time were responsible for ripping coalfield communities apart, and the then Prime Minister did little to repair the fabric. We are still trying to rebuild those communities up and down the country. Sport programmes delivered in coalfields have been shown to have a positive impact on communities. They reduce antisocial activity, increase feelings of public security and reduce the number of young people involved in violent crime. In many of those communities, only one or two pubs in certain villages bind people together, so sports facilities provide an essential opportunity.

As the shadow Minister for Sport, I have seen at first hand how sport can change lives, especially young people’s. The physical benefits are plain to see, but just as important are the support structures it can provide: mentoring, friendship and a place to belong. I will continue to be an advocate for community sports. However, we need more than somewhere to play sports; we need coaches—people who can spot talent, or who can spot
vulnerable young people and go on to help them. Sometimes people cannot get the support they need from their families and they look to coaches in sports facilities to be the person they can rely on. It is about camaraderie, the team, being together and knowing everyone is there for one another. The power of sport should not be underestimated.

Most sports facilities in coalfield sites are still privately owned and operated by the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, which we have heard about already. It is a national charity that supports mining communities and oversees hundreds of formerly British Coal-owned sports facilities, which are leased out to local miners' welfare schemes. Recently, however, the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation made “a strategic decision” not to offer grant aid to support welfare schemes running recreation grounds, but instead to focus on providing support services to individuals. That was part of a three-year plan created in 2015 to cut spending by £600,000, to extend the organisation’s projected lifespan.

It has led to a growing number of sports facilities in coalfields having to close because they just do not have enough money to keep going. That has happened at a time when Government cuts have forced secondary schools to cut the provision of physical education teaching by almost 35,000 hours.

It seems clear that the Government owe a historical debt to the communities in coalfield sites. For years, people in those communities worked in incredibly dangerous conditions, as we heard from the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who spoke about his family’s involvement. They worked in those conditions to produce the coal that fired this country’s economy for decades. What reward have they received for their service? A Prime Minister led an attack on mining in which miners were described as “the enemy within” and which decimated the mining industry and the communities that depended on it.

I urge the Minister to consider the points that have been made in this debate, to do everything she can to reduce deprivation in coalfield sites, and to focus particularly on the sustainability of sports facilities. Sport can improve lives, increase community cohesion, give young people a purpose, give families an opportunity to be together and change young peoples’ futures. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation has the financial support to ensure that coalfield communities do not miss out.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call the Minister to respond to the debate. Perhaps she can leave a couple of minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley).

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I would be delighted, Mr Owen. Unlike the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), I do not think that this is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship. I am sure that it will be as much of a pleasure as last time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for securing the debate. I welcome the opportunity to raise awareness of this important issue and to explore with hon. Members what can be done. I am grateful to him, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for meeting me earlier this year. It was a helpful introduction to their concerns about the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation and to the aspiration of hon. Members to seek greater investment in their communities. I would also be very happy to meet the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) to discuss Malby, if that would help. The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) about devolution is interesting, albeit challenging, given the way that funds are distributed for sports across the UK. I will take that away and think about it.

This is clearly an important subject. Like all hon. Members who have spoken, I firmly believe that sport and physical activity should be for everyone, no matter where they come from or where they live. Sport has the power to transform lives and the benefits go far beyond the physical, which is at the heart of what we are trying to achieve through the sport and physical activity strategy. Sporting Future was one of the first strategies that I delivered as the Sports Minister in 2015. At its core is a desire to create a healthier, happier and more productive nation. Supporting people to be more active in whatever way best suits them is a crucial part of that.

One of the greatest factors that affects people’s desire and ability to get involved is the environment and facilities that they can access. Facilities are key. For some people, especially for older generations, taking part in sport can bring back memories of crumbling changing rooms, muddy pitches and jumpers for goalposts, so good-quality, inclusive and welcoming environments are important in encouraging people to get active and, more importantly, stay active.

I am pleased that the Government are doing so much to transform sporting facilities across the country. I recognise that Sporting Future is not perfect, but we are insistent that facilities and the environment for sport and physical activity should be a priority. It made clear our support for bringing together sport and physical activity facilities with other community services. It also highlighted the benefits of multi-sport facilities in improving usage and sustainability. More than that, it placed the customer—the person—at the heart of facility design. Gone are the simple days of “build it and they will come”. We must be smarter and we must think harder.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Given the local government cuts in leisure, given that the industry does not support sport as it used to, certainly in my area, and given the real problems of modern illnesses such as child and adult obesity across the UK, particularly in our coalfield communities, what more does the Minister think the NHS can do to make a large-scale material difference in improving the health of our country by promoting physical activity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) suggested? The Minister’s strategy is worthy, but will it make a sufficient difference to deal with modern killers? Do we need to be much more ambitious and involve the NHS?

Tracey Crouch: We already involve the NHS, but we can do more. That is not within my portfolio, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that a lot is going on in terms of the social prescribing of physical activity in local communities to combat the issues that he mentioned.
[Tracey Crouch]

Other things can be done—he should remind me to tell him about some girl guides from Wales who just visited me, who have been working hard to get sports such as rugby into their schools, despite opposition from their headteachers to allowing girls to do traditionally boys’ sports. I will talk to him about that outside the Chamber, because it is not the issue that we are talking about today. There is no simple solution, though; we need a partnership across many different agencies.

To support the Government’s ambitions, Sport England is investing £40 million in large-scale facilities up to 2021 through its strategic facilities fund. Its community asset fund provides grants of up to £150,000 to organisations and communities that want to take more ownership over the spaces and facilities in their local areas. I am pleased to see the extensive support that Sport England has already provided to mining communities, with £4.8 million of public investment having been awarded to 30 miners’ welfare organisations since 2005.

I was very interested in the comments by the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, because it says here in my script that the Kiveton community sports park in South Yorkshire is a particularly successful and recent example of how Sport England funding has helped to regenerate land and support mining communities to be more active. The park is used for sports as diverse as football, cricket, tag rugby and bowls; there are also para-sports such as boccia and goalball. Clearly, we need to talk about Kiveton outside this Chamber. It also says here in my script that it is a wonderful facility, and I am thrilled that so many people are being introduced to such a wide array of sports. Clearly, our perception of what is being delivered at Kiveton is very different from the reality on the ground, and I welcome his feedback on that.

It also says here in my script that Kiveton is a great example of how local interest and drive can be harnessed to make a real difference for communities. Regardless of Kiveton, however, it is clear that facilities only work properly when they are properly planned, properly used and properly maintained. That means being clear about which people we think would benefit the most from using them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield and others spoke about CISWO. Although colleagues will appreciate that I am not in a position to comment on specific details of CISWO’s operations, I encourage all interested parties, including CISWO, the local trusts, local county sports partnerships and others to come together to discuss how local communities and facilities can best be supported and managed. Sport England has huge expertise in this area and I am sure that its staff would be very happy to contribute to such conversations. If that is of interest to colleagues, we can help to facilitate it.

We all know that many of the mining communities that we have talked about today include people from some of the hardest-to-reach groups in society, who are exactly the people who benefit the most from becoming more active. That is another key message in the sport and physical activity strategy. We want a strong focus from the whole sport and physical activity sector on how we can reach people who traditionally have not got involved in sport or who think sport or physical activity is not for them.

A great deal of support is already out there. Sport England has delivered a range of opportunities that place tackling inactivity and engaging under-represented groups at their core, and it is investing under unmet need in 12 local delivery pilots across the country. These pilots focus on bringing together a wide range of partners to solve inactivity challenges in very specific locations.

Public funding and support can only stretch so far, but I shall make sure that the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield is passed on to the Chancellor as soon as possible. However, as I said earlier, there is no simple answer and therefore no one solution. Organisations that have great ideas about developing their facilities need to be encouraged and directed to other sources of finance and support. They need to be brought together—even cajoled—and it is in this regard that local leadership and understanding is key. Local authorities are the organisations best placed to understand what is needed in their communities and how to build support for any proposal, and the brokerage that local leaders can offer is invaluable. I urge the parties involved to get around the table to find a solution. Whether it is the challenges of planning regulations, access to finance or a lack of co-ordination, there is an opportunity to address real community need.

What we must avoid at all costs is building facilities that do not have the support of local organisations and that have not been tested by the community. I know that as someone whose constituency received funding for a major sports facility in the early stages of Sport England and lottery funding. That facility was developed, but a few years later it went into administration, because it had not been subject to community testing and did not have the right business plan. I really encourage thinking through the bids that go into the lottery organisations.

Sir Kevin Barron: I am very grateful to the Minister for what she has said. I will make contact with the CISWO officer in my constituency to see whether I can facilitate a meeting between CISWO and Sport England, to look at all these issues that are affecting people up and down the land in former coalfield areas.

Tracey Crouch: We all want to see more and better facilities. It is important that we work together in partnership to help people to get active, but sporting facilities all need to be properly planned, and that is where the leadership of colleagues here in Parliament, including leadership of their colleagues in their own constituencies, is incredibly important. Understanding the needs of local communities and building a broad consensus are crucial, and those of us in Whitehall are probably not best placed to do those things. However, we can provide the expertise from Sport England to help to support those conversations.

In addition, the Cabinet Office and the Local Government Association’s “One Public Estate” programme brings together partners from across a range of different local backgrounds to help to deliver property-based projects. I know my colleagues in the Cabinet Office would be very happy to meet interested Members to discuss that programme further.
At the very centre of this debate is the importance of understanding how we can help communities to be more active, including how they can access better quality facilities. We all know of the benefits that people gain from sport: it improves mental and physical health, improves skills, brings communities together, and makes the country a more productive place. That is why we want to see strong local partnerships coming together to understand the needs in their area and consequently to reinvigorate their local facilities and green spaces.

That already happens in many places, but there is scope to do so much more. I want communities to be supported to ensure that everybody, regardless of their ability or background, feels able to get active and live a healthy, happy and full life. I urge Members, CISWO, the relevant local authorities and county sports partnerships to meet urgently to identify a way forward. It is only through local collaboration and the drive of the community that meaningful progress can be made.

I thank all the Members who participated in today’s debate. Their contributions have been thoughtful and insightful. The points that have been expressed have been well made and I hope that progress on this matter will be forthcoming, because, like everyone else in this Chamber, I passionately believe that sport should be for everyone and is at the heart of a happy and healthy nation.

5.26 pm

Ben Bradley: I thank the Minister for her response to the debate, for her consideration of this issue and for touching on the many positive things that the Government are doing to help grassroots sport. I particularly welcome her interest in discussing the matter with CISWO and the national governing bodies of sports. I would appreciate her help to facilitate that, whether the discussion is about finding new money—I have spoken to the Treasury about this issue—or how we co-ordinate and bring together the partnerships that she has mentioned, to make sure that any new money reaches the kind of facilities and communities that we have been discussing today. All of that would be very welcome.

I apologise for coughing my way through the debate; my next speech is about weaponising toddler germs for use by the Ministry of Defence. [Laughter.] My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made some comments about the historic success of local clubs and sportsmen, and the positive contribution that lottery funding can make, which was a very good point to include. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) told us about his experience of local clubs and laid out the challenges with CISWO. We have touched on how important it is that we can bring CISWO funding together and get CISWO to put a plan together, as the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), who represents a constituency neighbouring mine, mentioned. His point about NHS involvement was interesting; the health aspect of sport is certainly critical. He is right to say that it is the parents and grandparents of children who are the health priority in areas such as ours, and sporting facilities are clearly an access point for health services to reach those people. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is my Nan’s MP, touched on the community spirit that remains in coalfield areas, and the resilience and grit of these communities. He is absolutely spot on.

It was a shame, therefore, after such a positive debate about the future of our communities that the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who is the shadow Minister, could not help harking back and politicising the issue. I find that even in communities such as ours, my constituents tend not to appreciate that. My predecessor’s will to continue to do that is part of the reason that I am now here in Parliament, truthfully. I find that very interesting.

I strongly believe that investing in sports provision in coalfield communities should be a huge priority, particularly in terms of improving the health and wellbeing of those communities. Without spending a great deal of money, there are opportunities to create a really positive legacy for the coal industry and these communities.

I appreciate everybody’s support here in Westminster Hall today and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered sports facilities in coalfield areas.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 October 2018

[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]

International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered international freedom of religion or belief day 2018.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate. Thank you, Mr Walker, for chairing it—it is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship. International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day will take place on Saturday 27 October. I thank right hon. and hon. Members—particularly those who will make contributions—for coming along. The fact that we debate this issue annually does not take away from its importance. It is good to consider again where there are problems.

I thank the Minister and the Government for their actions to advance the right of freedom of religion or belief. The appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religious belief is very welcome. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has appointed more staff to its FORB team and, crucially, committed to developing a statistical database to track FORB violations around the world. Those are significant and commendable steps to advance FORB. I truly appreciate the efforts of the Government and in particular of the Minister, who I know will always speak out for those who have no voice. That is the reason we are here.

We are privileged to have Ministers who are so compassionate and committed to the cause of human rights. As I have said many times, I am thrilled that we have the right Ministers in the right place at the right time. I very much look forward to hearing the Government’s plans for commemorating International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day and for defending and promoting that vital human right.

Unfortunately, despite the amazing work that has been done, there is much still to do. FORB violations are rampant and truly global. Earlier today, at a panel on Afghanistan, I spoke about freedom of religious belief and how religious minorities of all kinds are persecuted in that country. Other Members will speak about Pakistan, which I recently visited with the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and Lord Alton. We had an opportunity to express concerns on behalf of religious minorities there, which we did with some fervour. I know she will speak about that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned Pakistan. Bangladesh was of course formerly East Pakistan. Is he aware of the abuses of freedom of religion—I imagine there are abuses of freedom of religion, too—that take place there? The photojournalist Shahidul Alam was imprisoned for taking pictures of student protests. I know the Minister is looking at that case, and I hope he can give us good news soon, but it is an affront to democracy. We cherish freedom of belief in this country, and such abuses should be cracked down on.

Jim Shannon: I absolutely agree. Wherever there are human rights abuses—abuses of journalists or whatever else—we should certainly speak out. I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us of that case.

Just today I tabled a question to the FCO asking whether it will make a public statement in support of a full, independent investigation into allegations of forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience in China. Others will speak about killings along religious lines in Nigeria.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from China, I am sure that, like many of us, he is alarmed by the recent BBC news reports that millions of Muslims in China are being interned, seemingly because of their faith and not much more. Although we rightly want to do lots of trade with China, does he agree that we should take that issue up at the highest levels with the Chinese Government?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of that case. He is absolutely right. The stories in the press in the past few days have been horrendous. We have seen the establishment of what cannot be called anything other than stalags—concentration camps—where people are subjected in every way, emotionally and physically, to efforts to change their views. Those Uyghur Muslims are among the people we speak up for today. I chair the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, which speaks out for people of Christian faith, of other faiths and of no faith. I also chair the APPG on Pakistani minorities. I am particularly interested in the issue the hon. Gentleman mentions, and I thank him for doing so.

Closer to home—we should not take away from what is happening here—there has been a 40% increase in hate crime on the basis of religious belief in England and Wales, and it is reported that churches in occupied territories in Ukraine have been denied registration and declared illegal. I am sure hon. Members will discuss those issues in much more detail—I intend to give just a general introduction—but I raise them to highlight the grave importance of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. Now more than ever, we must come together to stand up for those who suffer intolerance and persecution.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I fully agree with him about the importance of speaking out for people of all faiths, in all countries, who suffer persecution for their faith. Does he agree, though, that we should celebrate the strength of multi-faith communities that live together harmoniously and the contribution that different communities working collectively can make to improving all our lives?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is good to remind ourselves that, around the world, many groups of different faiths celebrate together. On our visit to Pakistan, to which the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will refer, we had an opportunity to
encourage faiths to come together. It is important that we recognise, as I am sure everyone who will contribute to the debate does, that there is a need to understand that although we may have different religious faiths, there is nothing wrong with us coming together and appreciating each other's faiths, thereby strengthening each other. It is important to do that.

Theresa Villiers: (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Is it not also worth the House noting with concern that attacks on freedom of religion and Christian minorities are often a sign of worse to come? Regimes that oppress freedom of religion are likely to violate other human rights.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady for making that point. We highlighted the persecution of religious minorities when we visited Pakistan. To illustrate her point, 13,600 people have been abducted in Punjab province, and there have been 2,900 rapes and 190 gang rapes of women. The level of sexual violence against women is despicable and bothers me greatly, as I am sure it bothers everyone else in the House. That is an indication—it starts with that and then goes on to everything else. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right, and the horrendous statistics back up her point.

Of course, protecting FORB not only is vital for individual welfare but plays a key role in preventing social instability. Although stability is a complex phenomenon, the case of Myanmar shows how unaddressed Government and social persecution of religious groups can explode into violence, undermining stability and creating humanitarian crises. Indeed, the UN specifies that discriminatory practices, or targeting communities based on their identity, is a key risk factor for atrocity crimes.

In September, the House of Lords International Relations Committee published evidence from the UN and the World Bank highlighting that the tipping point for joining a violent terrorist group was usually some sort of violation of law, or a sense of violation of law. That goes back to what the right hon. Lady said. That shows that making sure that human rights are protected can play an important role in ensuring stability and preventing violent conflict, which in turn is vital to long-term economic development.

The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs recently stated: “Promoting the rule of law and democracy globally is key to developing the UK’s prosperity.” In the short term, the Committee stated, the Government “will face conflicting priorities between human rights and other Government policies, especially trade deals.”

We need to be careful about those. The Committee continued:

“This may create short term conflicts, but the prioritisation of human rights is in the UK’s long-term commercial, as well as moral, interest.”

I hope the Minister can tell us something positive about that in his response.

Given the importance of protecting FORB and marking International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, I want to make five recommendations that might help in the significant efforts being made to advance FORB. I will then briefly discuss FORB issues in several countries in south Asia and the middle east, namely Pakistan, India, Nepal, Turkey, Egypt and Iran.

My first recommendation is for Departments that are significantly affected by FORB issues, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development, to produce strategic plans for how they can advance this fundamental right and for them to work regularly with Lord Ahmad to co-ordinate their work. That is important. Would the Minister be willing to encourage those Departments to develop such plans? Will he also push for FORB literacy training for staff, so that they can understand the religious dynamics and tensions that clearly exist in the countries in which they work?

Secondly, DFID operates in many countries that have severe levels of discrimination and violence towards certain religious or belief groups. In these countries, DFID could encourage more non-governmental organisations to develop programmes that promote the welfare of marginalised communities and help to reduce tensions between religious or belief groups in conflict. Would the Minister be willing to encourage and support DFID to take such action? I know he would—I know I am pushing at an open door, to be honest—but I want to put the point on record. Will he ensure within DFID that modules that teach respect for people of all faiths and none are included in more education programmes, as well as capacity building programmes for police, civil servants, NGOs and other groups? I will not steal anyone else's thunder, but it was important to see the police and other departments in Pakistan working to ensure that these things happen as well.

Finally in this section, I commend the Minister for the Government's role in developing country-specific strategies for advancing FORB. Will he continue to work with FCO heads of mission and DFID country heads to produce more of these plans for promoting FORB?

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston, the noble Lord Alton of Liverpool and I made a trip to Pakistan; the hon. Lady will speak about it, because it is important to do so. Religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and other groups face very significant persecution in Pakistan and are severely marginalised.

When we were there, we visited some of the slums where the Christians, for example, were living. It is very hard, and none of us was not touched by what we saw. Any slum where any group lives is horrific, but we went to the Christian slum in particular, where there were 48,000 people living in 8,000 houses. It was quite unbelievable. I call them houses, but they were rudimentary. They were never more than a single block or a wooden frame with a carpet thrown over it. There was a single hose that ran through the slum, and open sewers. One thing about it, which the hon. Lady will speak about, is that the children were happy, smiling and clean. There was certainly a willingness to try to do something.

I do not do the pools, but if I did, or if I won the lottery, I would certainly give whatever money I won to do a project there. I have spoken to the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), and I intend to put forward some programmes...
that he might be sympathetic to assisting out there for all those who live in slums—all those minority groups, whatever they may be. It is important to do that.

I want to comment quickly on the 5% employment quota for non-Muslim Pakistanis. It is all very well for the Government to set a 5% quota for religious minorities to achieve jobs, but if people do not have the education to get those jobs and achieve the goal, it does not matter very much. The Minister has kindly said that he will look at that as well.

I also want to speak about possible reforms to the criminal law to prevent the persecution of religious or belief minorities in Pakistan. I will not go into too much detail, because some of it has been highly confidential, as the Minister knows, but I will say that we had the opportunity to meet two of the three judges who will decide the fate of Asia Bibi, who has been in prison under a death sentence for eight years, separated from her husband and family. We need a law that does not penalise people or treat them adversely, because someone with malicious intent can make an allegation, which is clearly what we have seen in this case. We made those comments clear, although I will say no more about that, other than to say that the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will comment on it.

Next, I will speak about the FORB situation in India. Despite Prime Minister Modi’s pledged commitment to “complete freedom of faith”, since his election in 2014 there has been a significant increase in anti-minority rhetoric and mob violence against Muslims and other minorities. Let us be quite clear: I am here to speak for every religious minority, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who intervened earlier, knows. I am here to speak for all religious minorities, wherever they may be. We have spoken about the Uighur Muslims in China; we will speak about the clear persecution of Muslims in India. I want to speak up for those people as well and ensure that the Indian Government are aware of their commitment to international religious freedom through the UN. There have also been hundreds of attacks on Christians.

Worryingly, at the end of July 2018, in Assam State, the Indian Government effectively stripped 4 million people, mostly Muslims, of their citizenship, branding them illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. How annoying and frustrating is it to watch a democratic country specifically targeting those of other religious beliefs? The situation bears worrying similarities to the plight of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who in 1982 also had their citizenship removed and were labelled Bangladeshi before being attacked by the Burmese military.

It is hard not to get emotional, strongly agitated and full of angst about what is taking place across the world, because there is so much happening. This debate is a chance to reiterate those points, and others will do so. All this is very concerning, not only for obvious reasons, but because violence and discrimination could cause significant grievance among the 250 million-strong non-Hindu population of India, leading to instability. Mob violence has already increased significantly across India, and in the past few months both ISIS and al-Qaeda have called on India’s Muslim population—predicted to be the second largest, if not the largest, in the world—to “take revenge”. We have a difficult situation developing in that country, and if the Indian Government do not start to do something about it, we are in great trouble.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman used the phrase “across the world”. While there are excellent organisations such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide that operate in this space, I have always been particularly struck by Open Doors’ “World Watch List 2018”. Going back to that phrase “across the world”, is it not shocking that we can draw a line from the west coast of Africa all the way through the middle east to the Pacific ocean and in every single country along that route there is persecution of Christians? Does he think it might be a good idea if every Christian place of worship in this country had the Open Doors “World Watch List 2018” up in its hall or reception as a visual reminder of what some of our brothers and sisters in the faith have to put up with?

Jim Shannon: That is a salient reminder for us all. We have one in the Freedom of Religious Belief office here. I am regularly in contact with Open Doors and many of the other organisations—Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release International and the Barnabas Fund—and our churches all have them as well. The hon. Gentleman will know this, but every morning in my and other people’s prayer times, when we go around the countries of the world, there are 50 or 60 countries where persecution is rife. That is always a reminder to me at the beginning of the day of the freedom that we have here, and that others do not. He is right and I thank him for his intervention.

We had the ISIS-inspired attack in Madhya Pradesh in India, in which 10 people were killed. For the benefit of both India and its potential for a stable long-term relationship with the UK, we must take a stand against growing human rights violations there. I hope that the Minister can work with the Indian Government at least to make them aware that we are concerned.

I will speak quickly about Nepal. As the Minister knows, the Nepalese penal code 2017 contains problematic provisions that criminalise religious conversion and “hurting religious sentiment”. Those words give the Government power to do a lot of things to persecute religious minorities. We have had reports of 20 Christians being arrested and four churches being burnt down. Where does this stop? The Nepalese Government receives some DFID funding and gets support from our Government. The laws are insensitive to the feelings of religious minorities and their positions, and we believe that the legislation relating to criminal liability for doctors, and the issue of arrest warrants, is completely irrational and illegal. There is an excellent opportunity for the UK to suggest that Nepal reconsider its problematic provisions in order to stay in line with its obligations as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Members of the Human Rights Council must adhere to its principles.

Turkey has become a difficult country. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton referred to journalists, and Turkey’s clampdown on journalists and the media has been atrocious. Pakistan has been asked to send 230 Turkish teachers back to Turkey to make them accountable and to have their rights taken away. I have written to the Minister suggesting that we do all we can to ensure that the Turkish Government cannot do that. An early-day motion in the House this week also refers to that.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Is he aware of another example of Christian persecution in the middle east: that of the American
Quakers? Although they have an illustrious history of helping refugees of all faiths in the second world war and of hiding Jewish children, they are now on a banned list for travel to Israel. Does that not seem baffling?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that up. I was not aware of that one, but we will certainly pursue it through the APPG.

There has been a surge in ultra-nationalist rhetoric across Turkey, alongside hate speech and incitement to violence against non-Sunni Muslims. Religious minority groups face growing harassment, and foreign missionaries have been arrested and deported. Most notably, in 2016 the American pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested, along with his wife, and accused of being a threat to national security—the threat being that he was a Christian in Turkey, preaching the gospel to people who wanted to hear it. Where is the threat in that? The European Court of Human Rights has made many judgments on those and other long-standing issues, such as the right to raise one’s children in line with one’s religious or philosophical views, the right to establish places of worship and the right not to disclose one’s religious beliefs, but they have not been addressed by the Turkish Government.

Egypt may have fallen off the map a wee bit, but I could not be here without mentioning it. Egypt has many serious human rights issues, including restrictions on freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. In recent years, Egyptian authorities have used torture and enforced disappearance against hundreds of people, and dozens have been extra-judicially executed. In addition, last year more than 100 Christians were killed in terror attacks amid an atmosphere of continued impunity for sectarian violence. In November 2017 gunmen attacked a mosque in North Sinai, killing over 300 people—the deadliest attack seen in Egypt for many years.

In December 2017 the head of the Egyptian Parliament’s committee on religion said that a new law was being drawn up to criminalise atheism. Well, the APPG that I have the privilege of chairing speaks up for those of Christian faith, of other faiths and of no faith, and that is contrary to what we believe in. The freedom to have one’s own thoughts is very much part of a democratic society. That law seems not to have had much support, although that is probably because the Egyptian criminal code already has severe provisions that can be used to target both atheists and “apostates”, to use their language.

It is important to highlight the plight of the Baha’is in Iran, as we often do in this House. While many religious and belief groups are persecuted by the Iranian regime, Baha’is are a particular target for official persecution. Since 1979, Iranian authorities have killed or executed more than 200 leaders of the Baha’i faith and nearly 1,000 Baha’is have been arbitrarily arrested in the last decade. Baha’is have been murdered simply for their faith.

I have a small but vibrant and particularly vocal Baha’i group in my constituency. I have attended their events, and I know they will be encouraged that the plight of Baha’is being mentioned in this House. They are often denied the right to higher education or prevented from working, and often their lands or businesses are taken away from them. Despite the presidency of the supposedly centrist Rouhani, oppression of the Baha’is in Iran is getting worse.

Hon. Members will know how important FORB is to me, as it is to them. I was going to say that I should stop speaking so that others have something to talk about but, tragically, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, there is no shortage of topics to cover when we look at what is happening across the world.

FORB is a fundamental human right not only because of its importance to human dignity and flourishing, but because of the role it plays in preventing conflict and maintaining stability. I thank the Government for their commitment to this right and humbly suggest that, to advance FORB even further, the Minister should consider: producing plans to provide DFID and Ministry of Defence staff with FORB literacy training; encouraging the development of Government and civil society programmes that promote FORB; and working with FCO and DFID country heads to develop country-specific FORB strategies.

I am sure that those from Christian Solidarity Worldwide will not mind me saying that just this week an event took place in the House—many Members present attended it—on its toolkit for standing up for freedom of religion or belief. It has produced a really good publication—if the Minister did not get a copy, I will make sure that he does—which is a toolkit for all of us individually but also for civil servants and those in departments across the world.

Hopefully these recommendations can help make a difference for religious or minority groups in countries such as Pakistan, India, Nepal, Turkey, Egypt and Iran who are being denied their right to FORB. The sheer volume of FORB violations in those countries—and elsewhere, including the UK—points us to the importance of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, which necessarily gives us the opportunity to come together and stand up for all those who are suffering, all those who are attacked, and all those who have to struggle and fight for something we take for granted. I come back to Pakistan where, as the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston knows, we went to church under police protection. By comparison, here in the United Kingdom we at least have the freedom to go to church and worship our God.

As parliamentarians, it is our duty to stand up for people, wherever they may be. To help with that, I direct hon. Members to the toolkit produced by Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for coming to the debate. We may never meet some of the people across the world on whose behalf we are speaking, but today we have the opportunity to speak on their behalf.

1.56 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on a wide-ranging speech that covered many areas. I know colleagues will mention many countries of concern across the world; I will focus on what we can do here. Today, we are standing up in Parliament to say how important freedom of religious faith and belief is to all of us, as it...
is to many colleagues who are not here. It is the responsibility of this country, faith leaders and indeed individual worshippers and people of no faith to stand up, regardless of your faith, for all those around the world who are being persecuted.

I was born an Anglican and worship in a Baptist church, so I call on the leaders of those Churches and of all faith groups in this country to get up every time there is a problem with persecution—there are such problems most of the time—and say, “As a Christian, I abhor the persecution by Christians of a minority,” or, “As a Muslim, I abhor the persecution of members of other faiths—Christians, Hindus or Buddhists—by a Muslim majority country.” I would like to see that, because sometimes, I fear, we are hot on looking at the persecution of people who share our faith—it is right and important that we are—but a little less vocal when it comes to the persecution of others. The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned the case in China that has been highlighted by the BBC. It is vital that, as Christians, we stand up for Muslims who, reports suggest, are being targeted there.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. We in this country have sometimes—especially at this time—been a bit confused about the difference between the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights? Many cases have been brought to it by many different faith groups, and it has stoutly defended their rights. After all, it was born out of the second world war, which had a significant human rights-related issue. It is important that we be able to do that. That was perhaps not quite the case in the past. I understand the strength of feeling, particularly in Christian communities, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) rightly pointed out, but this is a human rights issue that applies to all people of all religions and none, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford also rightly points out.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to the Minister, who takes his role incredibly seriously. We are proud to have him in that position.

As Members of Parliament, we are honoured to be able to travel quite a lot. I encourage all Members, when traveling to another country—even if it is not part of their role, or they may be on a Committee visit—to meet people of faith or no faith who are being persecuted, or who are experiencing that sort of problem. I have done that on some occasions. I have also met people of minority faiths who are supported and do not have a problem. On a recent visit to Kosovo—a predominantly Muslim country, but one that has freedom of religion enshrined in its constitution—I was honoured to meet a Christian pastor to talk about that country’s serious problem with youth unemployment, which is running at 60%. He was very open about the way in which he was able to establish churches in that country and about the freedom of religion there. That gave me great comfort, but I have been in other countries where I have received less comfort from the reports of the minority groups that I met. Parliamentarians often have privileged access, and it is important that we use it to encourage those who are being persecuted or are under pressure, and to say, “We have not forgotten you. You are remembered in the United Kingdom and its Parliament.”

Some Governments that profess to offer freedom of religion and belief actually undermine it. The Foreign Office and the Department for International Development can advocate on behalf of minorities in relation to the methods used, which are often fairly technical. They include the development of the constitution and how it deals with what is often known as proselytising, or seeks to restrict the right to freedom of speech, which appears to be there but is actually not. Another such measure is refusal of planning permission for places of worship—it should be given, but reasons are found for it not to be, year after year. In the end, groups are forced to register to use temporary accommodation, or are not even able to meet together. Again, the Foreign Office, or DFID if it is working in the country, can say to Governments, “Hang on—you are not abiding by your own laws. You are discriminating against a group by not allowing them to establish a place of worship, even if it is permitted.”

Finally, although we know that Governments have little control over this, we need to look at the role of social media and how it enables the spread of fake news,
such as the spreading of lies about people that results, in some countries, in their being lynched or murdered for something that they have not done. We should encourage Governments to take up those cases, to ensure that those who use social media for such terrible purposes are held to account judicially, and that the companies that enable those people are regulated in a way that we have begun to talk about here.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak, Mr Walker. I hope that this Freedom of Religious Belief Day will be the chance for people of all faiths—particularly their leaders—and no faith to stand up for all those who are persecuted across the world, and to not make exceptions for those with whom they do not share a faith.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), not only for his excellent speech but for the tireless commitment he has shown to raising this issue in Parliament over the years.

The hon. Gentleman’s knowledge and passion were extremely helpful during our recent trip to Pakistan, where we discussed many of the issues that will be raised by hon. Members today. I was very grateful to the Pakistani people for the warm welcome we were given and for the engagement and energy that we saw in every face in every meeting every day. They have hope and faith, and they are looking to us for help. We travelled from cities to slums, from the heart of the Supreme Court to the outskirts of Islamabad, and we consistently found people who recognised the significant scale of the problems faced and who are ready and willing to tackle these challenges.

Today, just two days before International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, is the perfect time for me to discuss some of the challenges facing Pakistan and another important nation—China. I begin with something that the hon. Gentleman mentioned: the recent BBC investigation into China’s organ transplant industry. Last week, I attended a meeting about the persecution of a group I had never heard of before: Falun Gong practitioners. To say I was shocked and appalled by what I heard would be a significant understatement. Falun Gong is a spiritual practice that was outlawed by the Chinese Government in 1999. Since then, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that Falun Gong practitioners have been arbitrarily detained in their thousands, being regularly confined in labour camps or disappearing altogether. As if that were not bad enough, there are widespread, consistent and credible reports that China is forcibly removing organs from those prisoners to supply the vast, expanding and lucrative organ transplant industry.

Organ harvesting. I think we all need to take a moment to let the idea of that sink in. It is 2018 and we are talking about human beings—men, women and children—being treated like cattle, killed on demand for the benefit of others, and all because they practise the wrong faith. The Chinese Government of course deny that that is happening. They acknowledge that it used to happen, but say that it has stopped. I know that all hon. Members would very much like to believe that that is true, but the evidence suggests otherwise.

I refer the Minister to the 2016 report compiled by former Canadian Cabinet Minister David Kilgour, working alongside prominent international human rights lawyer David Matas and Ethan Gutmann, an award-winning investigative journalist. Their report is a meticulous examination of the transplant programmes of hundreds of hospitals in China. It draws on media reports, official statements, medical journals and hospital websites, and analyses information such as hospital revenue, bed counts, bed utilisation rates, surgical personnel, training programmes, state funding and more. Their research indicates that the Chinese regime is performing between 60,000 and 100,000 organ transplants a year—a vast discrepancy with the official estimates of roughly 10,000 a year. Where are the organs coming from?

The alarming discrepancy with the official statistics is not the only evidence—indeed, it is just the tip of the iceberg. For example, since 2000, Chinese transplant hospitals have quoted waiting times of between days and weeks for an organ transplant—sometimes even hours. To give hon. Members some context, the average waiting time for a kidney transplant in the UK or US is two to three years, and these countries have much longer established traditions of voluntary organ donation.

That evidence, combined with testimony from Chinese medical professionals, has led to reports by major news outlets across the world, including the BBC, CNN and The New York Times. Indeed, the evidence is so persuasive that it has led numerous countries across the world to condemn the practice and to introduce legislation to prevent organ transplant tourism to China. For example, in 2016 the United States House of Representatives passed resolution 343 on forced organ harvesting in China. That resolution “condemns the practice of state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in the People’s Republic of China” and “demands an immediate end to the...persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice”.

Earlier this month, it was announced that a people’s independent tribunal on forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience would begin in London during December 2018. The tribunal will be chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, who led the prosecution of Slobodan Milosevic, former President of Serbia, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I hope that hon. Members, including the Minister, will follow closely the work of the tribunal on forced organ harvesting.

The accusations are grave and difficult to believe, but does not their very gravity mean that we should do all we can to assess their validity? Should we not make absolutely sure that the claims are not true? Can we really say that we care about protecting freedom of religion or belief if we do not fully investigate such horrible reports? This Government have made very important strides against horrible practices such as modern-day slavery. Will the Minister agree to tackle this equally revolting practice? It is especially important now, as the Chinese Government seem to be expanding their persecution to Uighur Muslims. The UN has reported that 1 million Uighurs—innocent Chinese citizens; peaceful practitioners of Islam—have been detained in “re-education” camps in Xinjiang. Although I am a great believer in the importance of studying, I do not think that even I would want that kind of education. Also, The Guardian reports that millions of Uighur
Muslims have been arbitrarily detained for unwanted blood, tissue and DNA tests. Why? What could possibly be the motive for that? Given the evidence mentioned earlier, one could be forgiven for concluding that it is preparatory work for including Uighurs in the forced organ transplant system. Can we really stand by and not look into this?

I shall finish my discussion of freedom of religion or belief in relation to China by quoting a passage from a report produced in 2016 by the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission:

“This is an issue that emerged in 2006 and was initially met with official scepticism. Yet...the evidence has continued to accumulate, and the issue shows no sign of fading away. The United Kingdom should address it head on. Working with others within the international community, Britain could help commission an independent investigation to examine the size of China’s organ transplant industry...the United Kingdom could enact legislation making it a criminal offence to travel to China for organs. The UK Government should raise detailed questions about organ transplant processes and facilities with the Chinese Government, specifically around how waiting times for compatible organs are so short and where organs are sourced from.”

I hope that the Minister will take those recommendations to heart.

On my recent trip to Pakistan, I was shocked to learn about the ongoing persecution of another group that I was unfamiliar with until recently—the Ahmadis. The Pakistani penal code, which the Member for Strangford mentioned, is used to prevent Ahmadi Muslims from identifying as Muslims or even using Islamic greetings, although they are Islamic people. Ahmadis are routinely arrested arbitrarily on false charges of blasphemy and have been subjected to vicious attacks in public, including acid being thrown at them. Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered on grounds of faith. Ahmadis are also technically prohibited from voting, because to vote they are required by the state to register as non-Muslim, which many refuse to do.

**John Howell:** I have a lot of association with the group of Muslims the hon. Lady talks about. They came to my constituency and asked whether they could hold a meeting showing that the Koran was a book of peace, rather than a book of war, because they have a great attraction to the legitimate government system within a country. It was a fantastic event. I hope that the hon. Lady will, with me, endorse their great feeling for the British system, which they showed at that meeting.

**Ms Rimmer:** I will; I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is good that the Ahmadi felt that they could come. When people who have come from a country where they were persecuted have the faith and strength to go to someone who is completely alien or slightly alien to their religion, it gives some confidence that they believe in us and this country.

**Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** It is not only in Pakistan where intolerance is being displayed towards these people. In Glasgow in 2016, there was a case in which a man travelled a considerable distance—I cannot remember how far; he might have come from the north-east of England. [Interruption.] It may have been Birmingham. He went to confront a defendant in his shop and kill him—stab him to death—simply on the basis of his religious conviction. That is something that has been visited upon our own shores.
2.23 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). I associate myself with her comments.

It is always a pleasure to speak in a debate secured by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a doughty champion of the rights of people to express their religious belief and to find and approach God in their own way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) noted, this debate is not about the freedom to express the belief that I share with someone, but the freedom to express the belief that one has. The hon. Member for Strangford always makes the point that it is also about the freedom to express the belief in no religious faith, to not believe in God, to be an atheist, and to not be compelled to believe in something. For me, that is the core of this debate.

I am pleased to say that my church is quite active in the work of Open Doors. We publish the world watch list there each year, which brings home to those coming through the doors of St Matthias in Torquay—a Victorian church that has stood for about 150 years—that there are still many countries around the world where a church cannot stand so openly and its worshippers cannot just walk in. For many people, that simple act of wanting to go to church on a Sunday and praise their Lord could lead to them being sacked from their job, imprisoned, persecuted and, in some cases, killed. The chance to reflect on that in this Chamber is always welcome.

It is appropriate for me to reflect on this issue, which was recently brought home to me when I met two missionaries in my constituency who work in a part of the world where there is significant state repression. I have been asked not to give any more details than that. They told me about their experience of working in those areas—taking the faith out in a place where the Government do not have a particular view about the Christian faith as such, but believe that one’s faith should be in the Government itself, and where they want to crack down on any sign that people have their own thought processes or think for themselves.

In all too many cases, cracking down on people’s freedom of religion goes hand in glove with cracking down on every other right that they have. The countries that are likely to abuse religious rights and freedom of belief are exactly the same countries that crack down on journalists who write unhelpful articles or people who just believe that they should have a different say—for example, by being able to vote freely.

Every year we reflect, sadly, on the fact that North Korea tops Open Doors’ world watch list for persecution of Christians—being candid, it would top the list for the persecution by the state of any religious faith, except that which says that the leader of that country is a doughty champion of the rights of people to express their religious belief and to find and approach God in their own way. While the North Korean regime may wish to celebrate its 70th year, there is no doubt that we should celebrate the existence of that state for the last 70 years. The country is clearly in a desperate state and many people are starving.

Even among all that, there are still an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in the country. Even with everything they see around them, they hold on to that shining faith, which many of us share. However, it is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 people—the margins have to be wide, because it is incredibly hard to get accurate statistics or conduct work to establish what is going on in that country—might be in labour camps, in appalling conditions. In the concentration camps we saw in Europe back in the 1940s, when another tyrannical regime sought to put itself in the place of God.

While that may sound depressing, it is also quite inspiring for Christians in the west when we hear the story, for example, on the Open Doors website of Hein Woo, who planted a church in a North Korean labour camp—literally planted a church there for fellow Christians to come together in the name of God. While they were meeting in a toilet in a North Korean labour camp, rather than one of the great abbeys, such as the one we have opposite this place, or the churches that many of us frequent at home, there is still a church, and God and the Holy Spirit would have been there with them when they came together in Christ’s name. It is an inspiring picture that shows how the power of faith breaks through.

In the worst, most horrible and appalling conditions, people still see the Christian faith as their source of light and inspiration. The story talks about still thanking God for the grace that they receive. For me, that is what was so inspiring about what it means to those people.

When I have come to these debates in previous years, we have inevitably ended up looking towards the middle east and the appalling behaviour of Daesh, which saw Christian communities that had existed for thousands of years and are named in the Bible wiped out in a few weeks. Thankfully, that group is being pushed back and is in retreat, but that should not hide the fact that appalling repression continues. In some cases, the people who are seeking to liberate areas from Daesh still hold the view that only one faith can be tolerated in their communities.

The issues in Turkey have already been touched on. Many of us were hopeful when we started to see signs of a new regime in Saudi Arabia, which removed the ridiculous ban on women driving and started to make noises about letting them in cinemas. The last couple of weeks and what happened in that country’s Turkish consulate will perhaps have given people pause for thought, however, about where it is going. No matter what trade or other interests we have, we should not be afraid to challenge certain countries. All Christians want to do is to proclaim God and to proclaim their faith. They do not want to force someone else to share their faith; they just want to freely share theirs, as people can in this country.

We should look not just at the middle east, but at sub-Saharan Africa and at the situation in Nigeria in particular. Nigeria is a melting pot of many cultures and faiths. It has the opportunity and the resources to be a wonderful place that provides a high standard of living for its people, but all too often those resources are caught up in conflict or destroyed, particularly by Boko Haram’s actions in the north. That group has sought not only to suppress people’s religious freedoms, but to take away rights to education. It particularly does not want women and girls to be educated and it enforces those views and beliefs.

It will be interesting to hear the Minister’s thoughts, but the next place where we may need to think carefully about how we continue to promote peace, stability and security, and how we ensure that some of those basic
rights are guaranteed, might be in areas where the problem is not the state, but corrupt local forces on the ground or a non-state actor looking to impose its own regime and beliefs. We will need to think about how we continue to respond to that growing threat, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as the focus of certain extremist groups moves away from the middle east, from Syria and Iraq, to that troubled part of the world. We have seen the situation in Libya, where not only can faith not be freely practised, but where there has been a return of the type of scenes involving slavery that we hoped had disappeared in Wilberforce’s era, but which are sadly being revealed in our 21st-century world.

It is likely that we will be here again next year, and hopefully we will be able to reflect on some progress. It is easy to get quite depressed sometimes about where certain parts of the world are going, but it is worth remembering that religious repression was common 30 years ago across swathes of eastern Europe, including in parts of what is now the Federal Republic of Germany. Whole generations of people in Europe had to live under oppression.

I heard the points that my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Stafford made about the European convention on human rights, but there is a debate to be had about how it can become a more effective thing to be signed, because there can be very few people living in eastern Ukraine who feel that their rights are being well protected by having Russia as a signatory to that accord.

Mark Field: On one of my hon. Friend’s previous points, it is worth putting on the record that, although we would like to do more and achieve more, by raising the issue in this and other European Parliaments, we can shine a light on parts of the world where in the past that might not have happened. Although we can all become rather depressed about how much more work has to be done in this area, we can make a real impact through these sorts of debates, bringing parts of the world, and hence the rights of many millions that could otherwise be ignored, to the forefront of many people’s minds here and in other democracies. We should celebrate that, while recognising that there is much more to be done.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for his intervention. He is absolutely right that such debates shine a light and give hope to people who may not be able to express their faith freely. They show that in parts of the world where people can do that, we care, we focus and we will speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and the fact that people do such things under those conditions, are an inspiration to any of who profess to have faith—in my case, the Christian faith.

It is welcome that we continue to stand up and speak and that we continue to comment and make noise about this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see and that we continue to comment and make noise about my case, the Christian faith. As I said this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and speak up for their right to express their faith.
In Pakistan, as we have heard, it is a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, name their place of worship a mosque or even say the Islamic greeting. Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered in Pakistan. There is a separate electoral register that effectively denies them the right to vote. Even the grave of a Nobel laureate, Professor Abdus Salam, has been desecrated, to remove the word “Muslim”.

Finally, I turn to Thailand, where this month the Government have arrested 113 Ahmadiyya Muslim refugees amid a new crackdown on immigration, putting them at risk of deportation back to Pakistan, despite the fact that those arrested included Ahmadis who have been granted resettlement in Thailand.

Will the Minister take away from today’s debate the urgent need to raise the case of those Ahmadiyya Muslims with the Thai Government, and can he establish precisely what measures are being taken to ensure that such global hatred is prevented from reoccurring? I ask that final question because although I have taken Members on a global tour, the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community has now spread to the UK.

It was referred to earlier, but I also give the example of the murder of an Ahmadiyya shopkeeper, Asad Shah, in Glasgow. I could also cite the case of the Waltham Forest communities forum, which actively stopped an Ahmadiyya Muslim from being re-elected, stating that he could not be a representative of Islam. There is an undercurrent of hostility, in the form of posters calling for a boycott of Ahmadiyya businesses. The former national president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association has even described Ahmadiyya posters being torn down on campuses right across the country.

Such a scourge of extremism is a stain on the freedom of religion that we rightly and proudly celebrate here in this country.

Let me start with some positive news. Earlier this week, Members may have heard news of a 13-year-old boy in Pakistan called Sharjeel, who was the only Christian in his class, all the other pupils being Muslim. Last week he turned off a water tap at school, for which he was beaten and expelled, on the grounds that he had polluted the water supply. Colleagues may recall the case of Asia Bibi, the wife and mother who is still in detention, some nine years on, for drinking water from a communal tap, for which she was accused of polluting the water supply.

Sharjeel’s mother went to the school to object to his treatment. She was told that he was an infidel who was only fit for cleaning latrines. How, therefore, can I say that I have some positive news? Following the concerns raised in the past few days by religious freedom activists, in Pakistan and abroad, with the authorities in Pakistan, there has been a swift response, which is very different from what happened in Asia Bibi’s case, which I hope will help that lady. In Sharjeel’s case, direct action has been taken by the Human Rights Minister in Pakistan, Dr Shireen Mazari—the head of the school has been suspended and an inquiry has been launched by the district education office.

That shows that when we raise individual cases of concern, we can make a difference. Of course, we need to do more. I therefore ask the Minister to keep a watchful eye on Sharjeel’s case and to raise it as soon as he can with his counterparts in Pakistan. At the same time, may I also draw his attention to the fact that around half a billion pounds of UK aid is spent every year in Pakistan? However, there is little evidence that the aid money is being used either to prioritise freedom of religion or belief in that country or to help persecuted minorities. In Pakistan, 5% of minorities should be given proper jobs but, due to a lack of education, many members of minority groups do not qualify.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Strangford and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for the work they have done, because they have not just been talking about the issue, as I am today; they actually went to Pakistan and brought back their concerns, as did Lord Alton, who has told me about the camps that many of these people are living in, because they could not support themselves. The camps lack even the most basic facilities—no running water, electricity or latrines. However, I understand from Lord Alton that no DFID staff member has ever visited the camps. May I ask the Minister to rectify that omission, in a country that receives so much UK aid?

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, who does a huge amount of work in this area, for mentioning development. Does she agree that development without freedom of religion or belief is development that will not achieve its ends?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend puts it so well. He and I have seen that that is the case in many countries we have visited with the International Development Committee.

One of those countries is Nepal, where we met Christians who were greatly concerned—I am going back now three or four years—about restrictions on their freedom in that country. I thank the Minister, because I know that he has taken very seriously the concerns that we have expressed many times about such restrictions in

Fiona Bruce

2.42 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate to mark this year’s International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it, for his work on this issue and for the tour de force that was his speech. I will also say how much I respect every speech that has been made in the Chamber today; I agree with everything that has been said.
Nepal. Actually, they are now far worse than they were even when we visited the country a few years ago. He knows much about the situation in Nepal, so I ask him once again to urge the Government of Nepal to repeal or amend sections 155 to 159 of the country’s new penal code. That code, which came into force just in August, severely restricts freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. I have met people from Nepal who are now seriously concerned about being imprisoned as a result of speaking about their own faith in their own homes. That cannot be right.

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

I also ask the Minister to call on the Government of Nepal to amend its constitution. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) mentioned constitutions being used to restrict freedom of belief. Again, the Government of Nepal have put in place elements of the constitution that are deeply concerning. Specifically, I ask the Minister to press the Government of Nepal to remove from the constitution any reference to restrictions on conversion, bringing it into line with the country’s obligations under article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights.

I will turn briefly to another matter: the persecution of Falun Gong in China. I commend the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston on her superb speech. She said so much to express the horror and incredulity that many of us felt when we heard about forced organ harvesting. It is almost beyond belief to hear reports that a Government are incarcerating people because of their beliefs, taking their blood and DNA samples, and then—this would appear to be the case—which is why the Minister must look into it—there is a request, almost to order, for an organ for transplant. If that is correct, it is horrendous. Of course, when the organs are removed, the victims die.

I thank the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston for mentioning the report on that issue that the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission produced over two years ago. I do not like to go away from these events without presenting the Minister with something, so I handily have a copy of the report, which I will pass to him if he has not seen it. I ask that he acts on all the requests made by the hon. Lady. I ask that he raises the issue with the Chinese delegation at the next human rights dialogue with China, and asks why the practice appears to be continuing, despite the Chinese authorities’ announcement of a full transition to voluntary donations as long ago as 2015. If that is the case, let the Chinese authorities say so, because at the moment they are not confirming that.

I will now turn to a country that so far has not been mentioned: Russia. I will take this opportunity to pass to the Minister the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission’s latest report, launched just this Tuesday—it is on our website, conservativehumanrights.com—on human rights in Russia today. Time prohibits me from going into detail, but I hope he will read the report, particularly the several sections that are pertinent to today’s debate. Those sections deal with restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, assembly, association, and religion or belief. It is concerning to note how many religious groups other than the Russian Orthodox Church now face increasing restrictions in Russia.

The commission received detailed submissions from the European Association of Jehovah’s Christian Witnesses regarding the recent treatment of its members in Russia. In April, the Russian Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” organisation. Those who continue to practise their faith—of whom there are 170,000—risk being prosecuted and jailed for up to 10 years. That is not just theory; it is happening. Evidence of widespread, specific cases of arrest, search, and seizure for interrogation and detention of Jehovah’s Witnesses is detailed in the report. I would be grateful if the Minister could raise those concerns with his Russian counterparts, or ask his colleagues to do so, when the opportunity arises. I hope that will be soon, because the report contains the names of over 100 individual prisoners who are currently in detention, specifically in connection with their rights to freedom of religion or belief. We ask the Minister to ensure that those names are drawn to the attention of the Russian authorities. They have come to our commission from the Memorial human rights centre.

Jeremy Lefroy: It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. Russia has given so much to faith—to the Christian faith through the Orthodox faith, but also other faiths in other parts of Russia—and has benefitted so much from faith. We recall Dostoyevsky, who was converted to Christianity through his experience in a labour camp under the Tsars. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is sad to see a country that has gained so much from faith behaving in this way?

Fiona Bruce: I agree wholeheartedly. I was saddened and deeply concerned by the stories we heard at first hand of intimidation, harassment, imprisonment—often including cruel treatment in prison—and repression of people in Russia because of their beliefs.

Jim Shannon: In my introduction, I referred briefly to eastern Ukraine, which Russia has annexed and taken over. Some Baptist pastors went missing in that area and are entirely unaccounted for. Churches have been destroyed and people have been restricted from being able to worship their God. Russia has control there.

Fiona Bruce: Yes. There are many other aspects of the report that time precludes me from going into, but there are indeed many geographical areas where persecution is taking place.

I would be grateful if the Minister agreed to meet my co-commissioners and me to discuss our report. We received some evidence in person from some important witnesses, including Marina Litvinenko—her husband, as Members will remember, was assassinated in London over a decade ago—and Bill Browder, whose lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, died in prison in Russia, as a result of which Mr Browder has campaigned internationally for justice and human rights in Russia. We also received evidence via Skype from Garry Kasparov, the world chess champion, who was driven into exile because he could not freely live his life according to his beliefs in Russia.

I will now turn to Nigeria—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) wants to speak about that country, so I will shorten my comments a little. A serious issue is occurring in Nigeria. I will
refer first to my letter of 9 October to the Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), regarding the case of Leah Sharibu, one of 110 girls abducted by Boko Haram from their school in Dapchi. The other girls were all released some six months ago following negotiations, but Leah—the only Christian among them—remains in captivity because she refuses to convert in exchange for her freedom. She has now spent more than 200 days in captivity. Will the Minister speak with his ministerial counterpart, and perhaps respond to my question in that letter about what steps the UK Government can take to assist the Nigerian authorities in ensuring Leah’s swift and safe return?

I draw the Minister’s attention to concerns that nothing less than genocide is unfolding in Nigeria, with inadequate international attention paid to it. In recent years there has been an escalation in attacks on communities in several states by well-armed Fulani herdsmen. Local observers describe those attacks as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing. Reports from Christian Solidarity Worldwide—an organisation whose work globally, and in this case in Nigeria, I also pay tribute to—say that “the local chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) recently revealed that herdsmen have destroyed over 500 churches in Benue state alone since 2011.”

When I visited Nigeria over two years ago with the International Development Committee, my colleagues and I attended a roundtable of civil society representatives. One of those representatives was a senior member of the Christian Association of Nigeria, who highlighted concerns about the issue, saying that ethno-religious cleansing was happening. Sadly, insufficient notice of his concerns was taken by DFID representatives in Nigeria at the time. Two years later, the matter has significantly worsened. I implore the Minister to look into the situation. It has been exacerbated by inadequate Nigerian Government action, which CSW says has “entrenched impunity”.

“The people being persecuted by those herdsmen need Government support, as the herdsmen are so brutal that individual communities are defenceless against them. Only yesterday evening, at a meeting of Nigerians, I spoke with someone who had lived in Nigeria until very recently. He told me that those herder militias are so brutal that even Boko Haram leaves them alone. They are armed with sophisticated weaponry, including AK47s, in some cases chemicals, and even rocket launchers. Those militias are believed to have murdered more people in 2015, 2016 and 2017 than Boko Haram, destroying, overrunning and seizing property and land, and displacing tens of thousands. It is not sufficient to say that they are simply traveller communities involved in farmer-herder clashes, attacking indiscriminately. That is what I heard when I was there.

Attacks on Christian communities by these herdsmen are becoming far too common. CSW reports that in the first quarter of 2018 they have perpetrated more than 100 attacks on communities in central Nigeria, claiming more than 1,000 lives. To give one example, in August a Nigerian pastor, Adamu Wurum Gyang, his three children and his wife were burnt alive when their house was set on fire in Abonong village. A clergyman, Ezekiel Dachomo, appealed in a video in September for assistance from the US, UK parliamentarians and the UN, saying:

“Please stand for us. We are dying... please allow us to survive. We have nobody. Only God in heaven can stand for us. Please, I am begging you. United Nations, your silence is getting worse... Please, please, I’m begging you stand for the helpless.”

The international community must hear these cries. Those of us who remember the barbaric genocide in Rwanda are reflecting now that history could be repeating itself. Will the Minister work with the UN to urge the Nigerian Government to develop effective solutions to bring an end to this atrocious violence?

Before I turn to my final country, I urge colleagues, in addition to commemorating International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day today, to support Red Wednesday on 28 November. I ask them to join calls for the Speaker to permit the buildings of Parliament—the Commons and the Lords—to be lit up red to highlight the concerns we have about these freedoms. I also ask them to urge local public buildings in their communities to do the same. A third day that I would like to draw colleagues’ attention to is specifically about victims of genocide. I tabled an early-day motion in July asking for support for an international day commemorating victims and survivors of religious persecution. If colleagues would be good enough to sign that EDM, we can perhaps bring the need to have a particular focus on victims and survivors much more into the international arena than we have to date.

I will move on to my final country, which is, as it was when we were last in this Chamber debating this issue, the UK. I rejoice that here in the UK we enjoy a significant heritage of pruning and protecting freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. We do not suffer persecution of the type we have heard about in many countries. However, I have become increasingly concerned in recent years about whether these freedoms are being adequately protected in practice in our country.

I welcome the recent Supreme Court judgment regarding Ashers Baking Company, where the Court ruled that the owners should not be compelled to promote a message that clashes with their own sincerely held biblical beliefs. The ruling has implications not simply for Christians or for religious people; it is an important safeguard for us all, because it upholds an important principle of freedom of expression—namely, that no one should be compelled to express a belief that they do not hold, still less a message with which they strongly disagree.

None the less, I want to sound two notes of caution in closing. First, although I am pleased by the Supreme Court judgment, I am concerned that the case progressed to anything like the extent it did through our courts. I am all the more concerned because its progress was reportedly funded at enormous public expense—to the tune of around a quarter of a million pounds—by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and that is not to mention the fees of the McArthur family. Should the issue not have been sensibly resolved more quickly, and certainly without the trauma that the brave McArthur family must have endured to make the public stand they did? I pay tribute to them, as I do to the Christian Institute, which supported them. Why did a public body support the action? Why did the courts not uphold this important burden much earlier in the process? As one part of the solution, I suggest that we need to see a redoubling of efforts to promote religious literacy in the judicial system.
Secondly, while underlining my welcome of the recent judgment and the vindication of the McArthur family, it is important to recognise that that does not negate the challenges faced by many other Christians in the UK on account of their Christian faith. I hope that the judgment is a turning point in securing a better, practical settlement in the protection in everyday life of religious freedom generally, not only for Christians, but for those with other beliefs. I hope that the judgment will encourage those who have sincere beliefs to speak out about them and not to feel that they are subject to what has been called “the chilling effect”, inhibiting them from doing so. I hope that we will see further evidence in coming months that judicially, politically and culturally our commitment to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as to freedom of expression, is deep and real here in the UK, even where that freedom may be politically or culturally inconvenient. In terms of religious freedom, we should stand as an exemplar beacon of hope to others who suffer far more gravely around the world.

3.6 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. Equally, it is an enormous honour for me to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who in so many ways stands as a beacon for all of us, particularly those of us who recently became Members, who share her deep convictions and principles. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is my friend—on securing this debate. He is another shining beacon, an example and a city set on a hill in this regard and many others.

With this debate, we are talking about something that is fundamental to civilisation: freedom of religion or belief. It is a fundamental freedom. It is in so many ways the foundation freedom. I feel passionately about the subject because I am a member of a religious minority—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—that has a long history of persecution and misrepresentation. Happily, those dark days are largely behind us, but the lessons learned are deeply ingrained and any suggestion of intolerance or persecution of any minority religious group or minority group of any kind is anathema to me, as I am sure it is to other hon. and right hon. Members.

The first President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, declared the human right to exercise “that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family is one of its choicest gifts.”

On another occasion, he said: “Meddle not with any man for his religion: all governments ought to permit every man to enjoy his religion unmolested. No man is authorised to take away life in consequence of difference of religion, which all laws and governments ought to tolerate and protect, right or wrong.”

Freedom of religion or belief is a foundation human right as described in the universal declaration on human rights, which this coming December will be 70 years old. Article 18 reads: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It is my sincere belief that it is a fundamental responsibility of Government to frame such laws as are necessary to secure for each individual citizen the free exercise of conscience and to hold the state neutral. To violate that right is to suppress the freedom of the human soul, and no Government can long exist in peace, nor can any society prosper, while citizens are denied such fundamental freedoms.

Earlier this year, the Pew Research Centre published its ninth annual study of global restrictions on religion. It is a comprehensive examination of freedom of religion or belief in 198 countries, and it showed that for the second year in a row there has been an increase in the overall level of restrictions imposed on freedom of religion or belief by Governments. The report states that the share of countries with high or very high levels of Government restrictions—that is, laws, policies and actions by officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices—rose from 25% to 28%. That is the highest percentage of high or very high levels of Government restrictions since 2013, and falls just below the 10-year peak of 29% in 2012.

Open Doors summarises the global trends of people being persecuted for their Christian faith. More than 200 million believers in 50 countries have experienced high levels of persecution because of their faith, and more than 3,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the reporting period for 2018—more than twice as many in any previous reporting period. Each of Open Doors’ top 11 world watch list countries are now classified as places of extreme persecution—more countries than ever before in the 26 years of the world watch list.

Open Doors’ report highlights the deteriorating situations in Libya, Eritrea, India and Egypt. Countries where there is extreme persecution are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, many of which have been mentioned. For the 17th consecutive year, North Korea has been named the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, and sadly the situation in Afghanistan and Somalia is in many ways just as critical.

Sam Brownback, the recently appointed US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, has singled out the situation in China, which he describes as worsening for people of faith. The situation in China has been well documented, especially in the last few days, as reports of large-scale camps—euphemistically described as re-education centres or schools—have reached the west. As many as 1 million Muslims have been locked up in such camps without trial. In western China, the Uyghurs number some 12 million souls. They are Muslim people who live with the constant threat of arrest and censure by the Communist authorities. BBC journalist John Sudworth, whom I commend for his recent reports, states: “Harsh new legal penalties have been introduced to curtail Islamic identity and practice—banning, among other things, long beards and headscarves, the religious instruction of children, and even Islamic-sounding names.”

Christian churches have long been the object of official Chinese attention. To register as a state-sanctioned Christian organisation, religious leaders must receive training to adapt doctrine to Government and Communist party thinking. Recent repression efforts target both house and state-sanctioned churches through the harassment and detention of Christian believers, blocking entry to
sites of worship, interrupting gatherings, dismantling crosses, demolishing churches and disbanding congregations. Recently, the Chinese authorities have begun to insist on the installation of monitoring equipment in churches in Beijing.

Last month’s provisional deal between the Vatican and the Chinese Government is regarded as a key moment in decades of struggle over the Catholic Church’s right to appoint bishops in China. Pope Francis recently recognised the legitimacy of seven bishops approved and appointed by the Chinese Government. Yet a fundamental characteristic of freedom of religion is the right to Church autonomy to determine its own theology and doctrine, to establish membership standards and to own and manage sacred properties, and the right of its members to associate freely without unwarranted governmental or other official interference.

The position of Falun Gong practitioners, which has been mentioned, and Tibetan Muslims is also well documented, with both subjected to some of the worst extremes of Chinese oppression. Our view of China must be tempered by what we know about those fundamental abuses of human rights, and when we embrace China or seem to celebrate its contribution to the world, we must never forget or leave behind the many millions of people of faith who are persecuted and prosecuted by the Chinese authorities. What representations have been made recently by Her Majesty’s Government to China about the treatment of religious minorities?

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that one of the questions to ask the Chinese Government is, “Why are you afraid of people of faith? They contribute so much to society. They’re not trying to undermine you. They may have a slightly different view on certain things. As Communists, you may proclaim atheism, although I suspect that quite a number of members of the Communist party do have a faith. What are you afraid of? You will benefit greatly from allowing people to fulfil their potential as sons and daughters of God.”

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend, and associate myself entirely with the sentiment that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) expressed. There is nothing to fear when one has faith, well founded, and any system that fears people of faith is a system that is in deep trouble. Such is the nature of tyranny and oppressive regimes everywhere.

The Christian and Yazidi minorities of northern Iraq were decimated by Daesh in 2014. Iraq’s Christian community once numbered 1.5 million, but today probably fewer than 200,000 Christians remain. Mark Green, the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, recently described the region in The Washington Post as “a land of pain...It’s very clear what the Yazidi have gone through as is disturbing as I can describe, and is ongoing. They have families that have been broken up and disappeared, as well as murder, rape and torture.”

I pay tribute to the recently announced Nobel peace prize winners, the Congolese doctor Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman, for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence in conflict. Ms Murad is 25 years old. I have a son of a similar age. The Wall Street Journal, when reporting the award of the Nobel peace prize, wrote: “Ms. Murad was among some 6,000 Yazidis who were rounded up by Islamic State militants when they overran northern Iraq in the summer of 2014.

Hundreds of adult men, including six of Ms. Murad’s brothers and stepbrothers, were murdered, while women and girls—as young as nine, the U.N. reported—were awarded to fighters who raped and sold them in slave markets. Ms. Murad escaped after three months and became one of the first Yazidi women to speak out about the horrors”.

Ms Murad wrote in August: “We, and the Yazidi community generally, need more than sympathy.”

What is being done by Her Majesty’s Government to offer aid, protection and security to the Christian and Yazidi communities in northern Iraq?

Jeremy Lefroy: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the work of the co-recipient of the Nobel peace prize, Denis Mukwege, who has also stood up bravely on behalf of particularly the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the face of the terrible civil strife that they have endured. Both those people exhibited enormous bravery and stood up for their beliefs.

Stephen Kerr: I, once again, thank my hon. Friend. I think I might have mispronounced the gentleman’s name when I mentioned him, for which I apologise, but I absolutely associate myself with what my hon. Friend has said.

To return to the case that has to be made and remade for the primacy of freedom of religion or belief, earlier this year the all-party group for freedom of religion or belief, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Strangford, welcomed Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Dr Daniel Mark, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, to Parliament. I want to reflect on some of the remarks that Elder Christofferson made on that occasion because they are highly pertinent. He said that freedom of religion benefits not only believers but all of society, whether they know it or not. He tied religious freedom to the freedoms of worship, association, expression and opinion, and assembly, and from arbitrary arrest and detention, and interference in home and family, saying that all rights and liberties are mutually supportive, with freedom of religion as what he called, “the root freedom in giving life to all others... Religious freedom protects the freedom of individual belief and expression in all areas of human activity. This enables people to develop and express their own opinions in matters of philosophy, politics, business, literature, art, science, and other areas, which naturally leads to social and political diversity.”

Elder Christofferson went on to say that freedom of religion connects to the rights of free speech, free expression, freedom of the press, and freedom peacefully to assemble, and that those basic freedoms tend to rise and fall together.

As I conclude, may I ask the Minister to consider the following questions? How will the Government respond to the commitments made at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in relation to freedom of religion
or belief? How will such matters be followed up? In Washington in July, an event was sponsored by the US Administration at which there was something called the Potomac declaration and the Potomac plan of action, part of the first ever US-sponsored Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. How can we ensure that such gatherings are not just more talk? How can we ensure that they are more than talk? Are we prepared to do more to stress the link between international development and adherence to article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights and perhaps even the Potomac declaration? Is Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon’s July appointment as the Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religion or belief intended to be seen as an answer to what the United States calls an ambassador-at-large for freedom of religion or belief? What exactly is the extent of the remit that the noble Lord Ahmad now has?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Another pertinent question would be: what resources has Lord Ahmad been given to carry out that specific function?

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that additional question on the role that the noble Lord has been given, which we all welcome and had long sought.

May I thank you, Mr McCabe, for the opportunity to participate in this important debate? I pay tribute to all my colleagues who have spoken or will speak in this debate, which I consider to be one of the most important debates that we hold annually. It allows us the opportunity to restate our collective, individual and national commitment to the principle of freedom of religion or belief—a freedom that I believe this place represents to the whole world.

3.24 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I warmly congratulate on securing this debate, has a debate coming up on 27 November on the subject of armed violence against farming communities in Nigeria, most of whom are Christian. I will use the situation in Nigeria as an example of how we might approach the issue of religious freedom. Although this does not fall under my remit as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, I do know the country and feel that I can comment in that context.

The federal and state Governments in Nigeria are prevented from adopting a state religion or discriminating in any way on religious grounds. The split between Christians and Muslims is almost exactly 50/50—there is about a 1% difference between the two. Although some 12 states follow sharia law, they do so for Muslim-to-Muslim relations, and it would be wrong to characterise an area in Nigeria as either Christian or Muslim. For example, although significant numbers of Christians live in the north, which is traditionally thought of as a Muslim area, there is no evidence of sharia courts being used for Christian activities unless they particularly want to raise a concern about a Muslim activity. Sharia law is simply for Muslim-to-Muslim activities.

Both Muslim and Christian groups in Nigeria have complained about the Government’s handling of disputes, particularly in the central band across the middle of the country where there are long-standing disputes between Christian farmers and Muslim herders involving rival claims and complaints that security forces did not intervene when farming villages were attacked by herdsmen. It is interesting to note that when farming villages were attacked by herdsmen, there was uproar in Abuja. The President was summoned to Parliament, as were service chiefs and security advisers, and they were subjected to intense pressure from parliamentarians. Equally, however, the media regularly report claims by Christians that northern leaders, backed by the Government, are trying to Islamise the whole of the country. Of course, the presence of Boko Haram is crucial to that.

Boko Haram is a terrorist organisation. It is not one that the Government can control. Although, with the help of British service personnel who are there as advisers, the Nigerian Government are trying to attack Boko Haram, Boko Haram will not be defeated by military means alone. It will be defeated by the country sharing in the wealth creation that is going on in Nigeria and by making sure it is shared at an individual level, so that people are offered something that Boko Haram cannot offer. There are already signs of success in that.

There have also been reports that Christian groups in northern states are not given building permits—I think that was raised earlier. So we have a situation where Christian communities decide they are simply going to build the churches that they want to and will wait until the Government come and bulldoze them, which they do from time to time. It has happened in various states. However, I also came across an example of a mosque in a similar situation. It was threatened with demolition because it did not have the right planning permit. This issue goes across religions, but we rarely hear about it. Unfortunately, it appears the demolition of the mosque was stopped before it went ahead, and no one quite knows why.

It is worth noting that Muslims, too, complain of a lack of freedom of religion more generally. In one case, a Muslim was denied the chance to be called to the Nigerian Bar simply because she wore a hijab. Christians also complain that it is difficult for them to be admitted into schools, especially to study medicine and engineering, and in many states it is also difficult for them to take courses in Christianity.

There are optimistic signs, however. Some good work is being done by religious leaders on both sides of the argument, including efforts to bring peace to the areas in question. Those were started as a result of the attacks between farmers and herdsmen, particularly after 300 farmers were killed by raiding herdsmen. The violence is related to religious differences, but we should not pretend that all the violence in Nigeria is the result simply of religious differences. Economic and social factors are involved as well.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely acknowledge what my hon. Friend says. For example, many of the herdsmen, who used to have grazing grounds and could roam fairly freely, now find that the grazing grounds are restricted; but we cannot deny the element of ethnic or religious discrimination in the attacks—in large part, although not in all cases.

John Howell: I was not suggesting that religious differences played no part in the attacks, just that they are not the sole cause. We can legitimately blame a
number of other factors, including the fact that the media misreport situations widely across Nigeria. We can also blame rapid population growth: the population of Nigeria is about 190 million at the moment, but the World Bank predicts that by 2050—not long hence—it will be 400 million, making it the third most populous country in the world, after India and China. In that situation it is not surprising that tensions arise.

The tensions do have religious aspects. On 15 April 2017, 12 worshippers died and many more were injured in Aso village in Kaduna state, when herdsmen opened fire on an Easter vigil service. Media reports said the attackers boasted about disrupting the Easter celebration, but it is not known whether that is true. There are efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, to ensure that feelings on all sides are listened to and that reconciliation is reached.

I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) with a point about the importance of the European Court of Human Rights and what I might term its parent body, the Council of Europe. The right to hold religious beliefs is protected under article 9 of the European convention on human rights. A wide range of faiths have brought cases to protect their freedom to practise religion. I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about needing to tighten that up, but it depends on countries being willing to accept the judgments of the Court. Russia has suspended itself from the Council of Europe and can no longer appoint judges, although the population of Russia still has access to the European Court of Human Rights. The Court is hearing a vast number of cases brought by Russian individuals against the Russian state.

That is important for the reason that I raised earlier. The European Court of Human Rights was born out of the conflict of world war two, which had a great deal to do with religion—the Jewish faith and the imprisonment of those of that faith in concentration camps. However, the Council has gone beyond that. We have produced a tremendous number of reports about the need to ensure respect for the religious backgrounds of refugee families coming to Europe—that must of course be mutual, and respect should also come from them. We must not forget the vital role that the Council plays. It may be ignored by many UK Ministers and the UK may be the only country never to send a journalist to monitor its actions, but it still carries out its role and the treaties are signed, by us and others, on a consensual basis. That is an important point to bear in mind.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford on bringing the debate, and hope my remarks have been helpful in elucidating some of the details.

3.36 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr McCabe. We know that God is shining on us when there is a Scotsman in the Chair in Westminster Hall. I say that as an atheist. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate on an issue that he has championed consistently and with depth. It feels almost rude of me to say these things with my back to him, but I hope that he will take the words in the spirit in which they are meant. He has always stood up for the right of those of faith, and those of none, to go about their lives in the way they want.

Many Members have given examples illustrating the deeply horrifying and sinister persecution that takes place in countries around the world against different religious minorities. I have no desire to repeat those, but I want to single out one Member who spoke, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. She has a long-standing interest in their plight and does a good job chairing the group. I am only sorry that I cannot get to more of the meetings.

Many hon. Members will remember the case of Asad Shah, mentioned by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He was the Ahmadi shopkeeper from my constituency, on the south side of Glasgow, who was brutally killed. He was loved by everybody; there was not a person with a bad thing to say about him. He was a traditional shopkeeper: the self-service machines in Tesco were not for him; it was for him to fill the basket. People went in as customers and left as friends. He was brutally taken from us because of religious persecution.

I shall never forget that night. The shop where he was killed is about a four-minute walk from my front door. I remember seeing on social media that something had happened. No one quite knew what. I thought, “I am not going to sit up and worry about this. I am going to go to bed.” In the morning, I woke up to the worst possible news: the friendly shopkeeper had been slaughtered on the streets of my constituency. Afterwards, I saw something that I hope never to have to see again. People were rallying outside his shop, which sadly has since had to close because his family have had to leave Glasgow altogether. Hundreds of people had come together to stand in silence and remember a much loved and gentle man. Every time I saw him, he was always friendly. I do not think he ever remembered my name; I was just “Mr SNP” every time I went into his shop. I can assure the House that I have been called worse.

All of us on the south side of Glasgow remember Asad Shah with great affection. We will always be horrified at how he was taken from us and at the motivation behind it. The scenes of solidarity on that Friday night were quite something to see, but I hope I never have to see them again.

I wish the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden the very best in her work to address the plight of the Ahmadi people. As you will know, Mr McCabe, the south side of Glasgow has a substantial Muslim community. There are many Muslim people whom I count as friends and who are fairly progressive even on issues such as gay rights, but I am always amazed that the minute I mention Ahmadi Muslims, something happens—a shutter seems to come down. People keep telling me, “Stewart, it’s best that you don’t bring up the subject in other mosques or with other Muslims. It won’t help you at the next election.” However, it is vital that the hon. Lady and I, along with other hon. Members present, continue to shine a light on it.

Siobhain McDonagh: One of the most shocking things to come out of the inquiry that our all-party group has just undertaken is that there seems to be gloom about...
any progress against the persecution of the Ahmadis.

The younger generation in Pakistan appears to be more wedded to harassment of Ahmadis than the older generation, so we are in for decades of this. Nor should we assume that all Members of this House share the view that the hon. Gentleman espouses. Discrimination exists among our own ranks.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I think it was the hon. Member for Stirling who said that we have to continually make the case for religious freedom, just as we do for women’s rights, gay rights, ethnic minority rights or any other kind of social progress, because history tells us that someone somewhere will always be waiting to take those rights away.

Let me turn to a subject that has not yet been mentioned. The first debate that I secured as an MP was a debate in this Chamber on human rights in Saudi Arabia. My primary reason for securing it was the case of the jailed Saudi writer Raif Badawi, whom the Saudi Government considered to have committed the crime of apostasy. Here is a man who needs freedom from religion, not freedom of religion. His wife and their three beautiful children now have to live in Canada. He was sentenced to 1,000 lashes and is still in prison, as well as facing a massively unaffordable fine that he will never be able to pay.

I understand that Saudi Arabia is a very tough country and that there are many reformers who have to walk an incredibly fine line—it is never black and white. However, I want to hear more about what the Government are doing about Raif Badawi’s case. We hear constantly that it is being held up at the Supreme Court, yet the human rights organisations that I have talked to cannot see any evidence of that.

Saudi Arabia has been brought into sharp focus recently because of events in its consulate in Turkey. I echo what my party’s Westminster leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), told the Prime Minister yesterday: the time has come for a fundamental shift in the relationship between this kingdom and that kingdom on the issue of arms sales. This dance with the devil has gone on for too long, and it has to change.

I will bring my remarks to a close soon, because the Minister is the man we are all here to hear from. First, however, I must mention one religious group who have been persecuted more than any other in history: the Jewish people. They have been hunted from every single corner of the world for hundreds of years. It still happens today, even in this country. For the sake of hon. Members who were not present at our debate on antisemitism earlier this year, let me repeat what I said then.

In every city I go to, whether on holiday or on an official visit, I always try to visit the Jewish museum. I love visiting museums in many different cities, but the only museums in which I have to check in my backpack, take off my coat and go through airport-style security are the Jewish museums. It is the same in Paris, Berlin, New York or any other city. Why is that? Why do Jewish schools, even in this country, need security outside them? Why do synagogues around Europe need armed security? Many people think that the persecution of the Jewish people is over, but only a fool would think that.

It is a source of great pride that Scotland is, I think, the only country that has never had an antisemitic law on the statute book. Indeed, the declaration of Arbroath, the oldest medieval text in the world, refers to Jews and Gentiles as equals. That is not to say that everything in Scotland was a picnic; of course it was not. There are positive things in our history, but we should never take them for granted.

I welcome this debate, and I welcome the fact that there is an international day to celebrate freedom of religion or belief. Although I do not have a religion or a religious belief, I will stand with hon. Members who do. We will constantly make the case for people’s freedom to worship or not worship, as they see fit. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

3.47 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), because I was going to begin my speech by mentioning the case of the Jews, as he and many others have done. I know that hon. Members wish to hear from the Minister, but I ask them to bear with me as I sum up for the Opposition.

I am reminded of a particular case that is close to my heart; I hope hon. Members will forgive me if they have heard it before. It is the case of Raina Sevilla, a Jewish woman who moved from Switzerland to Paris in 1934 in the belief that France was a safe place for Jews to live. Just six years later, after the fall of Paris to the Nazis, she was asked, along with so many other Jews in Paris, to register and wear the yellow star. Some months later, she was picked up in the middle of the night and taken to the Vel’d’Hiv, the velodrome in the middle of Paris. In June or July 1942, along with so many others, she was taken from there to Drancy, the makeshift concentration camp on the north-east outskirts of Paris, near the railhead at Bobigny. The next day she was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was sent, along with many thousands of other older women and children, to the gas chambers. She was my great-grandmother. That is why this debate matters, and why it means so very much to all of us.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow South for taking up the case of the Jewish people. I am not a religious man either, but I am Jewish. Every single one of us knows where religious intolerance can end, because we have seen it. History teaches it to us. Every single Member this afternoon has given a brilliant speech telling us why this debate, timed to coincide with the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, is so appropriate, so important and so essential to the very essence of our existence as a Parliament in this free country of ours.

I pay tribute to my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope that he does not mind me calling him my good friend. We have worked closely together over many years. He gave his thanks to the Government for their support and for the good work done, and for what is still to be done. I know that the Minister will hear from him today, and I hope that the consultation will be developed. All Governments in this country, of every party, have supported the right that we value so greatly.
[Fabian Hamilton]

The hon. Gentleman talked about forced organ harvesting in China, as others have done this afternoon, and the Falun Gong, a religious minority in China who are being persecuted in astonishingly horrific ways. There are many parallels with what the Jews have suffered, especially during the second world war. He mentioned Chinese Muslims, who have been in the news recently. I have had emails, as I am sure have many other Members, from constituents who are angry and upset at what they hear in the media. It is good that our free media is able to report that, but it is tragic what they have to report and that this is still going on.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the abductions in Punjab and the Rohingya people in Myanmar, as did other Members. He made some positive suggestions, which I know the Minister will examine in his summing up. He talked about an area that is a concern to me as shadow Minister for the middle east and north Africa—Egypt and the torture, disappearances and executions of Christians. He mentioned his comprehensive five-point plan to help stop religious persecution abroad. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is one of my very favourite colleagues; we worked together on the International Development Committee for three years. In his excellent speech, he talked about the importance of freedom of religious belief, but he also said it was vital to stand up for all those abroad who suffer from persecution—that faith communities themselves must stand up against persecution not of their own faith but of other faiths in other countries. That is an essential point for all of us to remember. He talked about the role of the Court of Human Rights, which is fundamental to who we are as a country. I totally agree with that sentiment, and so does my party. Social media is a great invention, but the abuse and misuse of it has to be stopped in some way. I hope that we, not as legislators but as individuals, might have the power to do that.

My colleague and hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke about her recent trip to Pakistan and the warm reception she received. I have experienced that myself on visits to Pakistan. She mentioned the persecution of the Falun Gong in China, many of whom I have met over the years. Sadly she is now also familiar with the plight they endure day in, day out. She mentioned the 2016 report on transplant programmes in China, and we thank her for the detail she gave—the 60,000 to 100,000 organ transplants per year. Where are those organs coming from? I am afraid the conclusion that we have to draw is the organ harvesting that is so widely documented and evidenced now. It is the tip of an iceberg, as she said. She told us more about Pakistan and the ongoing persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims, and I will come to that in a minute.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made an excellent speech. He said that the right to believe in “your own faith, which is not necessarily my faith” is a fundamental one, and that he welcomed this debate each year. He spoke of how cracking down on religious belief always leads to cracking down on every other freedom. He referred also to North Korea and the shocking abuses there. It is the most repressive country in the world and is completely opposed to any freedom of religion, except the one religion that matters—the ability to worship the leader. There are still, in spite of all that, so many Christians still alive and active, and it is a tribute to human nature and the extraordinary conviction of people of faith and of no faith that those Christians, alone and abused and banned from practising their faith, can practice it in the holes in the grounds or the toilets, or wherever it may be in those forced labour camps. Let us hope that we see an end to those, sooner rather than later.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). I pay tribute to the work she has done, year in year out, to draw attention to the plight of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in this and other countries around the world. She detailed the worldwide persecution of that community in her tour d’horizon of all the countries in the world where they are persecuted for their faith. She mentioned the tragic murder of the shopkeeper Asad Shah in Glasgow, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow South, who knew that gentleman. It was absolutely shocking. Listening to my hon. Friend, I was reminded of what the Nazis did to the Jews in Germany. The way they are being treated is so very similar. We have to stand up for them and that is up to all of us. My hon. Friend mentioned the scourge of extremism being a stain on our reputation in our country, a country renowned throughout the world for its religious tolerance. It is our duty as Members of Parliament to stand up against it.

I give huge praise to my friend, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). We also served together on the International Development Committee for three years. As well as enjoying our time together, I learned a lot from her. We travelled across many countries where we saw the excellent work of the Department for International Development. She took us around the world in great detail. I will not reiterate that detail, because we want to hear from the Minister. She mentioned shocking cases in Pakistan, including that of Sharjeel and the positive response to the international condemnation, which means that this House can do something to draw attention to such horrors and persecution.

The hon. Lady also talked—this is very relevant—of the £500 million of taxpayers’ money that this country spends on aid in Pakistan, none of which is spent on promoting religious tolerance and education. She also mentioned Nepal—I have visited that country many times—and its new penal code. Let us hope that it sees sense and responds to international pressure to rescind that article of the penal code and to change its constitution. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s comments on that.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Falun Gong. She also talked about Russia, which we have not debated very much so far this afternoon, and the report of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. It is an excellent organisation—here is a Labour shadow spokesperson talking about a Conservative body, but any organisation or political body that draws attention to this kind of persecution should be praised by all of us, and I praise the hon. Lady for that work. She talked about what Boko Haram is doing in Nigeria, and the kidnapped girls. I thank her for reminding us that there is one child left—the one Christian girl. We need to campaign for her release too.
The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke of freedom of religion as a fundamental human right and noted that, for the seventh year in a row, we have seen an increase in governmental restrictions on religious freedom. He talked about Afghanistan and Somalia, which we have not heard very much about.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) has always contributed to these debates and has always had much to say in his area of expertise, which is Nigeria. We all benefit from that and I am grateful to learn more about Nigeria, especially as we know about the 50:50 split between Muslims and Christians. Generally, in spite of all the turmoil, including the vastly increasing population and the problems they face, there is actually a lot of good work going on in Nigeria. It is important that we remember that many nations that face problems of religious tolerance and freedom are doing their very best against such a backdrop.

The hon. Member for Henley used one word that is important throughout this whole debate: respect. It is a word that we do not hear too often these days. We need to show more respect, not just for one another in this place, but for those who have a different way of life and a different approach to a religion—a completely different faith from that which we may or may not have—and emphasise their right to live by that faith, underpinned by the relevant articles.

Let me say just a few words about human rights. The hon. Member for Stirling mentioned article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which I will not go through again. There is also article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which is very similar, and article 9 of the European convention on human rights, which clearly says much the same as well. We have many of these articles worldwide that confirm the right to religious freedom, yet we see it being abused so much all over the world.

I will not repeat what hon. Members have already said about different countries around the world. We should look to ourselves as well. According to data released by the Community Security Trust, a Jewish organisation in the United Kingdom, the number of antisemitic incidents in the UK rose by more than a third to record levels in 2016, and it has risen again since then. I know that the Government will be doing all they can to stop that, but according to the Metropolitan police here in London, the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 incidents in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016. The Casey review highlighted just three years ago that at least 55% of the general public believe there is a fundamental clash between Islam and British society values. We all need to work to change that. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Lord Ahmad, said in 2017:

“The persecution of individuals based on their religion or belief remains of profound concern to the United Kingdom. The freedom to practise, change or share one’s faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right, and the UK Government are committed to defending this human right and promoting respect and tolerance between religious communities.” —[Official Report, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 5P]

4.2 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for summing up for his party. One of the most important things about this issue is that it should be considered on a cross-party basis. That is not to say that there will not at times be disagreements about how we go about trying to promote freedom of religious belief, but I am pleased that he made such a strong case on behalf of the Opposition. We need to work together, and I make an open offer to him and to the SNP spokesman: if they want to come to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to learn more about the precise nature of the deep work that is done in this area, I would be only too happy for them to do so. That might be useful, given that we will have many more such debates.

I disagreed with one thing that the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said. This really is not about the Minister; it is about everyone else. These are Back-Bench debates, and while I shall try to answer the matters raised—please forgive me if I fail to do so; I will take some things up in writing—I have spent long enough on the Back Benches, rather than in a ministerial office, to recognise that it is very important to ensure that everyone has their say, instead of spending too much ministerial time on these issues. The hon. Gentleman also touched on Saudi Arabia, which is slightly outside the main scope of today’s debate, and I do not want to put too much wrong by giving him incorrect information, so if he will forgive me, I will write to him in detail afterwards.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on marking International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day once again. I am glad for my own good that it is a once-a-year occasion, but I know that, like many Members here, he takes this very seriously, 365 days a year. As ever, I pay great tribute to him and to all members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their tireless and persistent advocacy on this issue around the world. This Saturday, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and our posts across the globe will be marking the day in a variety of ways, all of which are designed to demonstrate the UK’s steadfast commitment to this fundamental human right.

That commitment is part of our broader policy of defending and promoting universal human rights and freedoms, which are a vital component of the rules-based international system. Freedom and equality must remain the bedrock of democracy, the form of government that we all recognise as delivering security, wellbeing and, hopefully, high levels of prosperity for all citizens. Promoting human rights also goes hand in hand with open markets and free trade, which nurture economic prosperity alongside genuine security and stability. Those are the conditions that ensure that all citizens can enjoy their political rights and freedoms. That is why we remain at the forefront of states that promote universally a culture of respect for human rights. I am very excited at the prospect of having both France and Germany on the Security Council over the next two years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) pointed out, which will mean having three large, western European nations with great reach across the globe, hopefully being able to make a real impact in this area.

We embrace the work that engages foreign Governments, both bilaterally and in multilateral forums such as the UN Human Rights Council. I reiterate all sentiments correctly. It also invites work on ambitious campaigns on totemic issues: we work on eradicating modern
slavery, preventing sexual violence in conflict, and promoting gender equality in all aspects of life, but notably in girls’ education—something that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is very committed to. On the back of our own Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London, we are working with 52 other nations across the Commonwealth to ensure 12 years of education for all girls around the world.

Let me say a little bit about Lord Ahmad’s role—it was brought up, and I feel it is worth touching on. The UK Government remain active at the highest levels, not least within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in standing up for the rights of people of all faiths and of none. The Prime Minister’s appointment in July of my noble Friend the Minister for Human Rights as her special envoy on freedom of religion or belief signalled the UK’s determination to step up our action to address religious discrimination and to promote mutual understanding and respect. It is important to recognise that the title of Prime Minister’s special envoy makes a real difference. It opens a lot of doors for anyone in that role, and it is a respected title across the world.

Lord Ahmad will lead renewed and targeted international efforts on this issue, including by raising awareness of the benefits to society of religious diversity and respect for all faiths and for none, which many Members have mentioned. His first objective is to up the tempo of the UK’s response to violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to focus on certain countries in particular. As colleagues know, promoting human rights, and specifically advocating for freedom of religion or belief, has long been a focus of the work of our embassies, high commissions and consulates general overseas.

Mark Field: I was going to come to that, because it was raised by our hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). Let me set out Lord Ahmad’s objectives. He will have two additional full-time staff working alongside our diplomatic network and international partners to work across Departments for a step change on freedom of religion or belief within diplomacy, to promote FORB in key countries of concern—obviously those will change from time to time, with their particular circumstances—and to respond effectively to any instances of the suppression of FORB that we are made aware of. I appreciate that there are only two members of staff, but there will be a greater emphasis on that issue in our embassies and high commissions overseas, not least among those who are employed locally.

I have raised the issue of freedom of religious belief on my travels over the past few months—for example, with the Nepalese Prime Minister. I have raised our concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation in Xinjiang with the Chinese Vice Premier. The Foreign Secretary reiterated our concerns about Xinjiang with Chinese state councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he visited in July. As hon. Members have said, we have increasingly grave concerns about the human rights situation in China and the Chinese Government’s deepening crackdown. Credible reports have been published recently about re-education camps and widespread surveillance and restrictions targeted at ethnic minorities. That issue has been covered in *The Economist* and elsewhere for some months.

Lord Ahmad has been extremely active in promoting human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief, in Sudan. For example, he expressed our serious concern about the persecution of Christians and the wanton destruction of places of worship. At the recent UN General Assembly in New York, in a meeting we hosted, to which many other countries were invited, he drew attention to the scourge of antisemitism and to the UN report on the crisis in Burma, which concluded that the Burmese military may have inflicted genocide. It has certainly carried out ethnic cleansing and has committed crimes against humanity against the Rohingya.

For the avoidance of any doubt, genocide is a legal term, so my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) will understand that we therefore tend not to use it. We do not wish to downplay the issue, but the term is legal rather than political, and it makes more sense for us to focus on political issues on which we can hold people to account directly.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for pointing that out. I used the term advisedly in this respect today.

Mark Field: I appreciate that.

Earlier in the year, Lord Ahmad met a range of religious leaders in Israel to discuss their concerns. He also met Yazidi and Christian leaders in Iraq to hear about their experiences and to reiterate the UK’s commitment to freedom of religion or belief across Iraq.

A number of hon. Members raised the especially distressing case of Asia Bibi. I assure hon. Members that we have been following the case very closely. I have made plain our views, and will continue to do so as a matter of principle, about the death penalty, let alone for that particular charge, and about the injustices that minorities in Pakistan face. I have made a number of representations to Pakistani authorities at all levels. We are at a highly sensitive moment in that very distressing case, so I am not able explain publicly what we and international partners are saying privately to the Pakistani authorities.

There are lots of issues to cover, so hon. Members will have to forgive me if there are things that I am unable to cover. If time runs away from me, I will catch up with hon. Members subsequently in writing. The hon. Member for Strangford raised a number of issues that I hope I have already covered. On DFID, we want to work with Lord Ahmad on a cross-governmental basis. I will say a bit more about that later.

I think I have covered the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) raised. I confess that I could not agree more with what he said; it was very refreshing. It makes life easier for us if we can say, ‘This is not special pleading because there are Christian groups here. The Christian groups want to see the rights of all religious groups upheld. This is a human rights issue first and foremost.’ That makes our argument so much more powerful. I echo my hon. Friend’s very valuable point.
The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) touched on a number of very important issues. The issue of organ harvesting is almost unbelievable. She will understand that, although I am not questioning the reports in any way, we need to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened. She will be aware that, in the past, organs have been harvested from people who have been executed. It is a grisly situation. We remain deeply concerned about the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and others in China simply because of their religious belief. We believe that societies that aim to guarantee freedom of religion are more stable, prosperous and resilient to violent extremism. The very wise words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on this matter were right. What have they got to fear? China is moving ahead in the world, including in terms of prosperity. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will appreciate why arguments about culture in particular have to be made privately, but please be assured that we do make our concerns felt.

It was interesting that the hon. Lady talked about Kachin and Shan states in Burma, rather than about the Rohingya situation, which has been discussed and on which a huge amount of work is being done in the international community. We are very concerned about the ongoing violence and we do not take the view that that part of Burma is stable and secure. There are human rights concerns, particularly relating to Christians, about those areas, which are run by both the Burmese army and armed ethnic groups. We raised concerns about the treatment of ethnic minorities in Burma, including in Kachin and Shan, in the Human Rights Council in September 2017. The former Foreign Secretary raised the matter during his March 2018 visit to Burma, and the new Foreign Secretary went to Burma and met Aung San Suu Kyi as recently as September this year. I know that all hon. Members will continue to press the Government of Burma on the crucial need for interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) touched on the reports that Pakistani refugees are rounded up and placed in detention centres in Thailand when they are assessed to be of the Ahmadi religion. We are following these reports with the utmost concern. It is a little more complicated than it might appear, although it is a grisly situation. We are very concerned about the situation there, and we do make our concerns felt, but please be assured that we will do our utmost to ensure that the situation is addressed.

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In addition, our embassy in Nepal—where we have a tremendous ambassador there in Richard Morris—regularly discusses human rights issues including freedom of religious belief with the Government of Nepal. Nepal does not receive a huge amount of DFID money, which is one of our concerns. We feel that it would be appropriate to have a number of other DFID programmes in Nepal—we have a tremendous historical connection, particularly between the Gurkhas and the Ministry of Defence—but we undertake significant work in that regard.

We have been closely monitoring the legal provision on freedom of religious belief included in the reforms to the national penal code in Nepal. The embassy has heard the concerns of the interfaith council—in fact, I heard them myself at a meeting in early May—about the lack of provision for registering religious organisations and the problems that they face in trying to conduct their day-to-day activities as non-governmental organisations, so we are keeping that under a fairly constant review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley is a great advocate for Nigeria and has done a tremendous job as a trade envoy there—I know how much work goes into that. I know there is to be a full debate on the situation in Nigeria, for which we will have more evidence, and I suspect it will be either for me or for the Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), to respond to that debate. For now, let me say that the Prime Minister raised the issue with President Buhari during her visit to Nigeria in the summer, and emphasised the need to tackle the crisis through mediation and conciliation—the general community conflict advice. With the wisdom that comes from knowing more about that country, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley was absolutely right to identify that the situation is more than a simple religious issue. It is a little more complicated than it might appear, although there are clear religious elements. In her representations, the Prime Minister was clear that the violence must stop while work is done to meet the needs of all affected communities. The Foreign Secretary raised the subject when he wrote to his counterpart in August, and the British high commissioner in Abuja has raised the issue with the Nigerian vice-president, with President Buhari’s chief of staff, and with a number of other governors of affected states.
I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He spoke about a number of issues, some of which I have touched on, namely the concerns about DFID funding and the Yazidis in Iraq.

I know we are running out of time, so I will finish by stressing that this is not just an issue for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. One of the most important things I do in much of my work on matters ranging from climate change to international energy policy or cyber-security, is to recognise that one of the great strengths of our sometimes much-maligned system of government—we are perhaps a little too self-deprecating about it—is the international reach of our Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the number of posts that it has across the world. We feel that it is important to take the UK’s work on religious freedom forward—it is very much a “One HMG” effort, as we put it. For example, the Department for International Development has increased its own engagement on the issue, which I think is very important, although it is a probably a step too far at the moment for development aid to be contingent on money coming through for that sort of work, as one or two of my hon. Friends were suggesting.

I am always struck by the fact DFID money goes to help some of the most vulnerable people. For example, we have had strong difficulties with Cambodia. We have tried to engage, but I think that, for example, paring back our funding for demining on the basis that we had disagreements about press freedom in Cambodia would have been the wrong step to take. By staying committed to a range of development and aid work, we can at least keep some sort of dialogue going, even if we might disapprove of that Government’s actions. That begins to build a degree of trust, and we can start moving in the right direction in other areas.

Although I understand the points rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, ending that assistance would be a retrograde step. If we get the development issues right and recognise that development is an integral part of a state’s recovery—that notion applies to Pakistan in particular, which is the single biggest recipient of DFID funds—we can hope that having a piece of the action in that respect buys us a place at the table to continue to make plain representations and achieve movement in the right direction. We should not hold up huge hopes in all individual cases, but I will take on board the important concerns expressed my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and make sure that they are passed back to Islamabad.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me but I am worried about running out of time, and I know that the hon. Member for Strangford will also want to get a word in at the end.

DFID’s wider programme is also designed to benefit religious minorities. As I touched on, in Iraq some £237.5 million in humanitarian support has helped Christians, Yazidis and other minorities who have been forced to flee persecution by Daesh. At the Foreign Office, we have also increased our support for freedom of religion or belief through the Magna Carta fund to over £1 million. That will fund projects in countries such as Burma, Indonesia, Iraq and Sudan.

Respect in education is a key element of our freedom of religion or belief strategy. Children are not born prejudiced; sadly, prejudice is learned. It does not have to be that way, and we believe that more should be done in schools to ensure that children remain as open minded as possible and respectful of difference. As the hon. Member for Leeds North East rightly said, respect is the operative word here. We believe that it is not simply enough to promote tolerance; indeed, that word alone suggests a begrudging acceptance. We plan to create a step-by-step guide for teachers and schools around the world to draw them into best practice and help them foster greater respect for different faiths and beliefs.

Naturally, learning does not end at school, and colleagues may recall that when we last debated this issue, I mentioned our efforts to increase religious literacy across the civil service. I am sure that hon. Members will be pleased to know that our collaboration with the LSE Faith Centre is proving extremely popular, and annual faith and diplomacy courses for staff across Whitehall are now very well attended. In addition to such projects and initiatives, we continue to promote the issue internationally with our bilateral advocacy. We work with like-minded partners as well as with civil society across the globe.

The UK Government remain absolutely convinced of the key importance of freedom of religion or belief, not just because it is a basic human right, but because it goes hand in hand with all the other rights and democratic freedoms that make up the foundations of a fair, stable and successful society. That is why my ministerial colleagues and I are committed to promoting and protecting freedom of religion, and I am so pleased that that applies to Parliament more widely. I thank everyone for their contributions. Through Government, we shall work and strive for a better world—a world in which there is greater mutual understanding and respect, where everyone is able to practise their faith or to hold no faith at all, and to live the life that they choose.

4.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his energy and deep interest in the subject of our debate, and for the steps that he and his Department have taken, which we all acknowledge. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and all right hon. and hon. Members for their insight and powerful contributions.

Today, this Chamber has been a place where a voice for the voiceless was heard. I will finish with the words of a man of faith and a scriptural text pertinent to the debate, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9:

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

I thank the Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to a debate that will mean much to people whom we may never met, but who greatly value what we can do for them in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered international freedom of religion or belief day 2018.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall  
Monday 29 October 2018  
[MRS ANNE MAIN in the Chair]

Public Holidays on Religious Occasions

5.30 pm  
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 220501 and 221860 relating to holding public holidays on religious occasions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I am pleased to open the debate about this interesting subject on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank the House for agreeing to the later start time to accommodate Members attending the Chamber for the Chancellor’s Budget statement, which I was able to hear myself.

I thank the Committee staff in the digital outreach team for their assistance with the consultation work that was conducted in advance of the debate. I am also grateful to the National Council of Hindu Temples UK, the Hindu Council UK, the National Secular Society and over 1,000 individual petitioners, most of whom are Muslim, who responded to the process. They provided me with valuable insights into the subject of public holidays and time off for religious occasions, as well as points and quotes that I will reference further.

Petition 220501 calls for public holidays on Muslim religious occasions and has more than 46,000 signatures. It states:

“This will give an opportunity for Muslim families to get together and share happiness with other religious communities. It is very important for Muslims to celebrate Eid.”

It adds that despite being the second largest UK religion, “Muslims don’t get a lawful Public Holiday on their two special religious occasions in a year”.

Petition 221860 calls for public holidays on Hindu special occasions and has more than 11,000 signatures. It states:

“It is very important for Hindus to celebrate Diwali. Festival of Lights is a major holiday that is also celebrated by Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs.”

It notes that Hinduism is the third largest religion in England but that Hindus do not get a “lawful Public Holiday” on religious occasions. The petition also asks for a public holiday on Dussehra.

Today is Budget day and the more numerate among us may have spotted that today’s petitions have fewer than 100,000 signatures, the threshold normally required for the Petitions Committee to schedule a debate. There are a number of factors for that, not least the absence of any petition over that threshold. When combined, these were among the next largest petitions, representing issues that primarily affect minority groups who may find it difficult to attract 100,000 signatures. The subject has not had a parliamentary debate since 2014 and is without doubt of interest to a significant number of people in the wider public.

It is fair to say that the petitions are essentially about the same issue: establishing public holidays for religious occasions. The Muslim and Hindu faiths are the second and third largest religions in the UK, the first being the Christian faith, which has public holidays during its major religious festivals at Easter and Christmas, as Members will be aware. It is equally fair to point out that the Government response to each petition is the same, stating:

“The Government has no plans to create a public holiday to commemorate religious festivals such as Eid” and “such as Diwali.” The responses add that the costs are “considerable” and cite the example of the 2012 diamond jubilee holiday, which cost about £1.2 billion. The responses add:

“The Government regularly receives requests for additional bank and public holidays to celebrate a variety of occasions including religious festivals. However the current pattern is well established and accepted.”

I am sure that that will have disappointed the petitioners, but some comfort can be taken from the Government’s comment that:

“The Government is committed to bringing people together in strong, united communities. We encourage and support people to have shared aspirations, values and experiences.”

The responses note that festivals such as Eid, Diwali and Dussehra “contribute towards this objective”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate. I spoke to him about the subject beforehand; I also discussed it with the Minister in the Tea Room earlier today. As a Christian, I value having public holidays to clearly mark the importance of religious holidays, but I understand that the Government are not disposed towards making that happen. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the strongest terms, employers should work with their employees to accommodate their wishes to take time off to celebrate Eid? Working with employers is probably the best way forward.

Martyn Day: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments; there is a lot of merit in what he suggests. I looked at various resources online in preparation for the debate, and ACAS gives very good advice to employers. I will address that point later in my speech, but we certainly need to highlight to the wider employing public the requirements to facilitate all religious faiths within the workforce.

I am sure that we all agree with the Government’s comments about trying to encourage greater engagement with communities. However, 87% of respondents to our consultation said that they felt that not allowing time off for religious occasions was discriminatory, while 84% felt that they could not ask for time off work or education for a religious occasion, so there are clearly underlying issues that need to be addressed.

I will start the debate with a range of questions. When are the festivals on which petitioners are requesting public holidays, and why are they important? Why do we have the public holidays that we have? How do we compare with other countries? How do we best achieve social cohesion across our multicultural societies? Last but not least, how do we satisfy the legitimate concerns of the petitioners? I will briefly take each question in turn.

First, when are the festivals on which petitioners are requesting public holidays, and why are they important? All four are moveable feasts; they are based on lunar calendars and are therefore not on fixed dates.
Eid al-Fitr is a Muslim festival that marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. It is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal, the 10th month of the Islamic calendar, but in the Gregorian calendar it shifts yearly, falling about 11 days earlier each year. This year, it was on Friday 15 June, while next year it will be on Tuesday 4 June.

Eid al-Adha, the other Muslim festival, is celebrated following the annual pilgrimage—the Hajj—and falls on the 10th day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic year. This year, it was on Tuesday 21 August; in 2019, it will be on Monday 12 August. The exact timing of each festival, however, is dependent on the sighting of the crescent moon following the new moon.

Diwali is the five-day festival of lights celebrated by Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains for a variety of reasons. It usually falls between mid-October and mid-November; it will be on Wednesday 7 November this year and on Sunday 27 October next year. The date is determined by the Hindu lunar calendar.

Dussehra is the Hindu festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil. It occurs on the 10th day of the month of Ashvin in the Hindu calendar; it was on Thursday 18 October this year and will be on Monday 7 October next year. It falls 20 days before Diwali. My thoughts and prayers go out to those who were affected by the Amritsar train accident, which killed 61 and injured many others during this year’s festivities. Sadly, the reporting of this tragedy on TV and in the news was how I learned the details of Dussehra.

The celebration of these festivals is very important to worshippers of the faiths concerned. They represent the most important occasions in their religious calendars. At a time when religious persecution is growing around the world, it is important that we do everything we can to protect people’s freedom to practise their religion or belief.

We can be very proud of the diversity of our nations within the UK. We have a modern multi-faith and multicultural society in which people of all faiths and none can follow their belief systems. However, we can never take that diversity and tolerance for granted, particularly as we have seen increased antisemitism and significant Islamophobia. Just yesterday, *The Sunday Times* reported on a poll in which 47% of respondents believed that Britain was becoming less tolerant of Muslims.

The Petitions Committee’s public engagement also suggests that things are not as good as they could be. Some 88% of those we engaged with felt that their community had few opportunities to get together to celebrate religious occasions. A large number of general comments that we received focused on fairness, inclusion and the need for religious diversity to be recognised through public holidays, while others spoke about wellbeing and benefits to society and the economy.

The Government’s response to the petitions focuses on the likely costs of holding an additional public holiday. Those costs could be very significant indeed, but they do not reflect the full economic impact because they would be partially offset by increased activity across the leisure, tourism and retail sectors as a result of domestic consumers enjoying time off. Enhancing our global reputation by recognising these festivals also has an unknown potential to attract international tourism.

Many people felt it unfair that although they were forced to take time off at Christmas and Easter, they struggled to get time off to celebrate their own religious festivals. Some 72% of respondents who identified themselves as directly affected said they had been refused time off work or education for a religious occasion. Similarly, 72% felt that their employer was not sympathetic to the request and did not understand its importance. Some of the respondents described the process of asking for time off for a religious occasion as “risky” or “risking job prospects and growth”.

Many people said they were made to feel guilty for asking for time off to celebrate religious occasions.

The Hindu Council UK points out that without guaranteed time off for religious occasions people are “penalised financially and spiritually by taking off time and thus losing income and forced to work (or study) at a time when there is a major religious celebration of their faith.”

The National Council of Hindu Temples UK advises:

“What should be a carefree positive celebration becomes tainted and stress laden and the final outcome is diminished”.

Two comments from the consultation, emphasising the issue of inclusion, are illustrative. One contributor said:

“Our government needs to guarantee its citizens the right to celebrate their particular religious festivals in order to make all its religious groups inclusive in modern British society.”

Another said:

“I feel as a British citizen and a tax payer, I should have the right to have my religious day off without having to make me feel that I am not part of this country.”

We clearly have an issue: those are strong arguments that something needs to change.

Why do we have the public holidays that we have? That is an important point to reflect on, before we consider adding new ones or changing existing ones. The original bank holidays were established under the Bank Holidays Act 1871 as days when banks could close and all trade could cease. Across the UK there are now a variety of bank and public holidays. There are eight such days in England and Wales, nine in Scotland and 10 in Northern Ireland. The differences are that in Scotland we have 2 January as a holiday and not Easter Monday, and the first rather than the last Monday in August. We have St Andrew’s day in Scotland, and in Northern Ireland there are St Patrick’s day and the battle of the Boyne commemoration.

Most of those days are determined by statute under the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971; some, such as new year’s day in England or the first Monday in May in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, are determined by royal proclamation under the 1971 Act; and some, such as Good Friday and Christmas day in England and Northern Ireland, are common law public holidays. The battle of the Boyne anniversary, proclaimed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has been a public holiday since 1926. The most recent addition, in 2007, was the St Andrew’s day holiday in Scotland. It is an official bank holiday, but it operates as a voluntary public holiday. Just to add to the complexity, bank holidays in Scotland are not necessarily public holidays, and public holidays can be set by local authorities.
Clearly, parts of the UK differ a bit as to the number of days, the specific days and how they have come about. It is also fair to point out that things have changed over time. Taking Scotland as an example, as I know it reasonably well, Christmas became a public holiday only in 1958, and Boxing day was added only in the early 1970s. Most of the current holidays are not on religious occasions, Easter and Christmas being the exceptions.

In comparing our holidays with those in other countries, I have not looked at the situation worldwide. However, compared with other European Union members we are at the bottom of the public holidays table. Countries with similar numbers of holidays to ours are Ireland with eight, Spain and Luxembourg with nine, and Hungary and Holland with 10. Every other EU nation has more, and Belgium and Latvia have as many as 17.

Of course, public holidays are only a part of the equation. Perhaps a better indicator is a person’s annual holiday entitlement, particularly as the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971 does not automatically entitle workers to time off on bank holidays. Instead, the right to time off comes from their contract of employment, which will cover holidays, public holidays and holiday pay. Full-time workers in the UK generally have the right to 28 days’ paid leave per year, with public holidays included in that, which means that most people have about 20 days’ leave that they can take at other times.

Some employers may well require staff to work on bank holidays, which means that designating additional national holidays still might not deliver the effect sought by the petitioners. Concern has also been raised by the National Secular Society, which commented:

“A likely result of increasing the number of public holidays by including Muslim, Hindu, or other religious festivals would therefore be a decrease in the number of discretionary holidays workers can take.

Compelling those who do not celebrate minority faith festivals to take time off work risks causing unnecessary resentment and would harm efforts to promote a concept of common citizenship.”

That concern was echoed by those who chose to comment on the House of Commons Facebook post about today’s petitions. On that forum, the majority of commentators did not think that new religious public holidays should be introduced. Some, such as Giselle, argued that no religious occasions should be public holidays, and Tom said:

“Religion is a private matter for individuals, not the business of the state or whole society.”

Others suggested that dates such as St George’s day should be holidays. There is clearly a demand for various national days across our nations.

How are we best to achieve social cohesion across our multicultural societies? Clearly we have a conundrum. How do we succeed in bringing people together, and supporting religious festivals as a way of achieving that, without causing any resentment and inadvertently hampering that objective? Although today’s petitions relate primarily to Muslims and Hindus, it is worth remembering that there are many other religions in the UK with smaller faith communities, and that their festivals are equally important to their individual worshippers.

The situation was summed up well by the National Secular Society:

“The UK’s religious landscape is in a state of continuous change. Our population is more irreligious, yet more religiously diverse, than ever before. A multi-faith approach to holidays can therefore never serve the individual needs of the many different people who make up the UK, or adequately keep abreast with the changes in the UK’s demographics. A more practical and equitable approach is to give workers greater flexibility, where their work allows, to take holidays on the specific days that matter to them.”

That is a pragmatic suggestion, which is perhaps let down only by the apparent lack of awareness in society as a whole, and among employers in particular, of the significance of religious occasions—something I mentioned earlier in my remarks.

That lack of awareness featured repeatedly in the comments by petitioners, who made the point powerfully. Many people said that employers wanted holidays to be booked well in advance, which was particularly difficult for Eid, because it is lunar and not on a specific calendar date. They said that employers often did not understand it. One person said:

“It’s very difficult to bring it up as many don’t recognise religious occasions and how paramount they are for the ones celebrating.”

Another commented:

“I’m made to feel like they’ve done me a favour by giving me the day off. Sometimes they say they cannot give me the day off because I took the day off for the last Eid. They don’t think Eid is important.”

Another said:

“The problem was mainly with my employer not understanding the importance of the occasion.”

Another said:

“There is a lot of scepticism on non-Christian holidays at my workplace—be it Eid or Diwali.”

One commentator said:

“Religious Holidays is sometimes spoken about like it’s a dirty subject and employers and schools do not understand the significance of it.”

That last point about schools is important, especially if communities wish to celebrate together and if religious families want their children to participate fully in their festivals. It can be difficult for pupils and students to get time off for religious festivals, and this year Eid al-Fitr fell within the GCSE exam timetable in England. In Scotland, Scottish Qualifications Authority examinations occur earlier, so that problem is heading in my Muslim constituents’ direction in a few years’ time. I ask Members from a Christian background to imagine for a moment what their thoughts would be if they or their constituents were required to sit exams on Christmas day, because that is the closest comparison. Clearly it puts students from faith backgrounds at a disadvantage.

That brings me to my last point about how to satisfy the legitimate concerns of the petitioners. Obviously, they would be delighted if the Government were to have a change of heart, and the Minister were to look at establishing public holidays for the largest minority religions. However, I suspect that that will not happen; indeed, I have in my remarks explored a variety of reasons why it might not be the best option. We do, however, have a problem that needs to be addressed, and I will make a few suggestions.
Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman referred to education. Does he feel, as I do, that raising awareness of other religious sects’ holidays through school education might be a way of gently pushing into people’s minds the importance of other celebration days for religious groups, whoever they may be? People might then say, “Do you know something? That is the way it should be.”

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman’s suggestion is a good one, because if we educate people young enough, they learn the lessons for life and we do not have to keep re-educating people. There is some merit in that suggestion.

Most of the petitioners who responded to the survey, 52%, said that they would prefer a legal right guaranteeing time off work or education to celebrate religious occasions not currently recognised as public holidays, such as Eid and Diwali. A small number of people, 5%, wanted the ability to swap public holidays such as Easter for other religious occasions. I ask the Minister whether those suggestions could be considered as a possible way forward.

It is clear that at the very least we need greater understanding among employers about the significance of religious festivals for employees who are people of faith—I am referring to all faiths here. No one should feel discriminated against for practising their religion. We must all do more to improve awareness; I would like to hear the Minister advise how the Government can ensure that public bodies in particular take that on board. We also need action to ensure that all employers sympathetically consider requests for time off to celebrate festivals or attend ceremonies, whenever it is reasonable and practical for the employee to be away from work. That is something I believe many workplaces could manage, with some foresight and advance planning.

Surely it must also be possible to consider the likely dates of key festivals well in advance and avoid educational bodies’ setting exams on those potential dates. In the absence of formal holidays on those festival dates, there is a need to ensure that support is in place for pupils and students who miss routine coursework during any non-attendance. Believers should not be forced to choose between education and their faith. Again, I look forward to hearing the Minister address those points in the summing-up.

In conclusion, I hope that my summary of the issues raised in the petitions has done justice to the petitioners’ concerns, and helped to raise public awareness of the wider issues.

5.51 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to follow the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). I congratulate him and the Petitions Committee on tabling this timely and important debate. I led the debate in this place in 2014 on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, which was responsible for petitions before we wisely set up the Petitions Committee. I am pleased to see that there is a 400% increase in Back-Bench interest in the debate today; clearly, we are gaining ground. We have a new Minister and a new Opposition spokesman, whom we can possibly convince of the wisdom of seeking to increase the number of public holidays on a religious basis in this country.

It is often said that the costs of public holidays are damaging to the economy, but as the hon. Gentleman said in his introduction, we have the fewest public holidays among people’s memories. We have fewer public holidays than the United States of America, which is often seen as the great bastion of free enterprise and of driving forward and therefore as discouraging people from taking holidays.

There is a clear issue here. The Chancellor today stressed the importance of improving Britain’s productivity. Providing people with a holiday increases their productivity, because people rest, recharge their batteries and come back to work far better off, rather than being forced to work long hours. I think it is the Leader of the Opposition who has been speaking about having a four-day week across the UK. I would not go as far as that, but it is important that, as we drive forward as a country, we should look at having potentially more public holidays, where people can take time off with their families and have the opportunity of some leisure time to gain the benefits of an advanced economy.

The hon. Gentleman has set out the position on public holidays now. If we look at them throughout the year, we have, broadly speaking, the Easter holidays, which are around March and April—by the way, they are not fixed; they change from year to year as well. We have public holidays on the first and last Monday in May, to go with some decent weather—[Laughter] Well, hopefully we will have some decent weather, but I know that is tempting fate most years. Then there is the last Monday in August, which also shifts around each year. Then we have Christmas and Boxing day in December and, finally, the new year’s break.

The reality is that, when those fall at weekends, the public holidays shift accordingly, to fall within the working week. It is not the case that we have public holidays specified on particular dates. One of the objections that has been suggested is that, because religious festivals may fall on days other than working days and are not necessarily completely predictable—although I would argue that they are—we could not have a public holiday during the week to celebrate the religious holidays when they fall at weekends.

One important issue is that, while Eid advances each year with the end of Ramadan, generally speaking it falls at the end of June or thereabouts. That is quite helpful to break up the year during the summer. Equally, Diwali is between October and November, as has been said, and breaks up the period between the August bank holiday and Christmas. I would go further, because the hon. Gentleman mentioned many of the great religions of the world, but not Judaism. I think we should have a holiday based around Judaism as well. That could fall on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, both of which tend to occur in September.

In our much more diverse country, as it is now, we have great adherence to religious faith, particularly among the great religions, but it is concentrated in particular areas. We are coming up to Diwali; indeed, the big holiday will not be Diwali itself, but the day after, which is the Hindu new year. That is when people of the Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Buddhist faiths will all go to their temples to pray for health, wealth and happiness in the new year, and will meet their families in the afternoon—a day when the people of those religions will, frankly, not be working anyway.
Why not recognise that fact and give everyone the opportunity to have a day off and recharge on that basis?

Equally, at Eid, when we come to the end of Ramadan and people are exhausted from the days of fasting, there is a day of prayer. Why should that not also be a public holiday, particularly given the range of Muslims now in this country? Should we not be a distraction in any case. Why should we limit ourselves to having public holidays only on the particular day of the week on which a public holiday falls, but that was rightly said, they are decided by the faith of their choice.

I suggest that the three dates I have put forward—both Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, and I think a consultation with the Jewish community would be well received. It is a requirement among people of the Jewish faith to fast, go to the synagogue and pray, breaking their fast at the end—funnily enough, there are many similarities between the Muslim and Jewish faiths on that particular issue. During those times, it is fundamental that someone who is Jewish observes both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even if they do not follow all the rest of the religious holidays.

I suggest that the three dates I have put forward—both in 2014, when I led the debate here, and now—fit what we seek to do, which is to increase the number of public holidays in the United Kingdom, spread them across the year and build them around religious faith, so that those who are of religious faith can celebrate their faith and not be forced to work or, indeed, to compete for opportunities to take time off. That is one of the fundamental things that are vital in terms of fairness and opportunity for everyone. There is certainly a case for extra public holidays based on faith, and I strongly support it.

I notice that the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), my constituency neighbour, is here. The London Borough of Harrow has the greatest adherence to religious faith of any place in the country. People celebrate their religion and follow it strongly, and I invite colleagues to come and visit during a faith day, because they will see people celebrating their faith and taking time off work to be with their families, as they should. It is right that we should enshrine that in legislation, giving people the opportunity to celebrate the faith of their choice.

I know that there are objections to proposals such as this, be it from secularists or even the Government, based on the cost of providing such holidays. However, I suggest that the cost to industry of disruption from people of religious faith taking time off is far greater than if those days were given as public holidays, with everybody then knowing when those days will be. Some people would object, saying that we cannot predict when Eid or Diwali will fall, but actually we can, because as was rightly said, they are decided by the phase of the moon. In times gone by, astronomers studied that very carefully. We can now, with a certain conviction, predict when the holidays will fall and set the public holidays far in advance.

In order to fulfil that, we may have to change the day of the week on which a public holiday falls, but that should not be a distraction in any case. Why should we limit ourselves to having public holidays only on Mondays? We do not do that for Christmas. When Christmas falls on a Saturday or Sunday, we will have Boxing day and then a public holiday, or possibly two, after. We unnaturally limit ourselves by only holding bank holidays on Mondays.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting forward a powerful argument and request for special days for different religious sects. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) referred, as did I in my intervention, to the greater capacity of employers to work with employees, but the hon. Gentleman has not referred to that yet. Does he feel that there is a halfway house towards that, with employers playing their part for employees who need those extra days off? Does he feel that that is the way forward?

Bob Blackman: There are clearly two issues. There are private employers and there are public sector bodies. We would clearly require people, as we do currently, to work in hospitals, the fire brigade and the police—I could continue naming other public services—on bank holidays or public holidays. However, I see no reason at all why appropriate arrangements should not be made, as to enable people of different faiths to work on different public holidays, flexing the workforce according to the requirements of a particular company or service. What is wrong with that?

I strongly support the principle of providing more public holidays—we have far too few in this country—and I strongly believe that we should base them around the major religions, to demonstrate that we celebrate all religions. We should consult with those communities, and particularly their leaderships, on when such public holidays should be held, whether they should be on the particular day of the week that the religious holiday falls on, and how they should be implemented, together with how firms and public services should operate. This idea would certainly meet with great enthusiasm among the general public and would give great certainty to employers, who would know what the position would be with their employees. We could predict these things in advance, so they could be planned in the calendar, rather than having people who celebrate particular faiths taking days off.

When I was a councillor in the London Borough of Brent, every religious holiday was programmed out of our calendars so that no meetings could take place on those days. Many days were declared as unacceptable for holding committee meetings or full council meetings or such like. If a London borough can do that, so can this country.

6.5 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to take part in the debate. I strongly echo the support we have heard for public holidays on Diwali, Dussehra, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. I find myself agreeing with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—a most unusual position for me—that the two most important days of the Jewish calendar are also very worthy of reference in a debate such as this. I commend the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and the Petitions Committee for initiating the debate, which is surely about the ambition of the Muslim and Hindu communities to recognise their most holy of days with public holidays and about our demanding that they are better valued, as communities and individuals, by the country in which they live. I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman that it beggars belief that exams are allowed to take place on such important occasions. Just as with Brent Council,
Harrow Council makes a point of not holding significant council meetings on days when important holidays are taking place within the communities that they serve.

I must confess that I have always supported increasing the number of public holidays and have always been sceptical of the claim that doing so would cost an arm and a leg. It is difficult to believe that the bank holiday granted for the diamond jubilee cost employers around £1.2 billion. I suspect that that is about as robust a statistic as one from the Vote Leave campaign during the Brexit referendum. I welcome that the Labour party is committed to making the national days of the home nations public holidays, but I ask Front-Bench Members, as I ask the Government, to go further.

The hon. Member for Harrow East alluded to the idea of a four-day week, which is no longer seen as a completely mad, hare-brained idea. There are progressive employers that have already introduced four-day weeks for their employees, or that are generous in giving employees time off to attend to matters of personal importance or to celebrate religious occasions. It really should not be beyond the wit of the greatest country on earth to find a way to grant public holidays for these hugely important days.

It is worth spelling it out that Islam and Hinduism are the second and third largest religions in the country. Islam represented almost 5% of the UK population as far back as 2011; I suspect that figure is higher now. Hinduism represents more than 1.5% of the population, and I am pleased to say that many Hindus live in my constituency.

Let me start with Diwali and Dussehra, which are both major Hindu festivals. I intend to spend much of Diwali visiting some of the great temples that serve my constituency, be it the International Siddhashram Shakti centre, Stanmore temple—that is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Harrow East, but we think of it as in Harrow West—or, in Brent, Neasden temple, which is one of the great Hindu temples worldwide and which many of my constituents attend regularly, particularly during Diwali.

Diwali symbolises the spiritual victory of light over darkness, good over evil and knowledge over ignorance. During the celebration, temples, homes, shops and office buildings owned by the community are brightly illuminated. One of the great joys of Diwali is seeing such celebration and such light.

Other faiths celebrate their respective festivals alongside Diwali. The Jains—it has been an honour today to attend the Jitopreneurs event taking place in the House of Lords—observe their own Diwali, alongside the Hindu Diwali. There is a Jain temple in Kenton Road; that, too, is not quite in Harrow West, although we see it as in Harrow West. There is a temple in Hayes, which many of the Jains in my constituency attend. The most important Jain temple in the UK is at Potters Bar, and many of my constituents will go there to celebrate Diwali.

It is worth spelling it out that the festival of Diwali is already an official holiday in a number of countries around the world, many of which have hugely close links to the UK. If it can be achieved that Diwali is marked in other countries, why cannot it be marked in the UK?

Dussehra, too, is a major Hindu festival and it is celebrated at the end of Navratri every year. It is observed in different ways from Diwali and is to remember the goddess Durga’s victory over the buffalo demon Mahishasura to restore and protect dharma. It is equally, if not more, important.

The two Muslim events that the petitioners understandably think should be marked as public holidays are Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Eid al-Adha is arguably the most holy of days, coming as it does at the end of the annual Hajj to Mecca—arguably one of the most remarkable acts of pilgrimage of any faith worldwide. It honours the willingness of Ibrahim—Abraham—to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God’s command, so even those of us of a Christian faith can recognise the significance of that moment without, surely, too much thought or effort. Eid al-Fitr is also a hugely important religious holiday for many of my constituents. It celebrates the conclusion of the 29 or 30 days of dawn-to-sunset fasting during the month of Ramadan.

On those occasions, the Salaam centre in north Harrow in my constituency, Harrow central mosque and, indeed, Stanmore mosque in the constituency of the hon. Member for Harrow East, which many of my constituents attend, are hugely busy places as people from my constituency attend to mark days that are of huge spiritual significance to them.

I recognise that there has traditionally been a reluctance with regard to the change that is sought, so it is worth my pointing out, as others have, that England and Wales have the lowest number of public holidays. Germany, whose economy some would say is doing slightly better than ours at the moment, has almost 50% more public holidays than the UK and productivity that is significantly higher. If Germany can make its economy work well with a larger number of public holidays, why on earth should not England and Wales—and, indeed, Scotland and Northern Ireland—do so as well?

Given that I suspect that the Front Benchers will not immediately cave today and say that they will support this change, I shall briefly mention an initiative from the United States, where the most progressive employers have introduced paid personal days for staff members to enable them to observe religious occasions or to use them for other personal reasons. They are not written into law as such, but they are a concept widely recognised by employers. Perhaps with tax incentives to assist, even the most recalcitrant of employers’ organisations might be willing to recognise that that could be a route, initially, to help employers to adjust to their employees being able to take time off to, perfectly reasonably, celebrate those two hugely important sets of public holidays in the Hindu community and the Islamic calendar.

In a spirit of optimism but also of hard-nosed realism, I recognise that those of us on the Back Benches still have some way to go to push Ministers and Opposition Front Benchers to accept the case for further paid public holidays to recognise important religious occasions, but I hope that this debate will contribute to that process and reassure those of Hindu or of Islamic faith that there are Members of Parliament who are determined to make the case for the special and holy days of their religion to be recognised in the way they should be.
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on his extremely informative introduction to the debate on behalf of the about 60,000 people who have signed the two petitions that we are considering. He and other hon. Members made powerful cases for the changes that we are discussing. He articulated well, as other Members did, the broader point that we have far fewer public holidays than our counterparts in the European Union, and those of us who live in England and Wales have, sadly, even fewer than those who live in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the Government get many requests—perhaps the Minister will tell us exactly how many she gets—for holidays, for all manner of occasions; that probably happens very regularly. His observation that the dates of all the festivals that we are talking about change from year to year was important in terms of the challenges that that presents as regards additional planning. It is a practical reason why, if the Government were minded to accede to the request, it would probably take considerable consultation and discussion to facilitate it.

I was disturbed to hear the hon. Gentleman’s comments about how many people in surveys feel that we are becoming a less tolerant society. All hon. Members present will have been disturbed to hear that. I think that it is a much greater issue than the question of public holidays that we are considering today.

The hon. Gentleman was right to point out that some employers require people to work on bank holidays and to take time off on another occasion. In that regard, as other hon. Members have mentioned, we should pay tribute to those people in the public sector who keep the country going on such occasions—for example, those who work in the NHS, the police, the emergency services and the utilities, those who work as care workers, and those who work in many other organisations that provide a service that cannot simply shut down for public holidays. We should recognise that that is an important part of this discussion.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned, as did other hon. Members, that there is a lack of awareness among employers about the meaning and importance of some religious holidays. I hope the Minister will comment on how we can spread information and best practice, so that people do not feel inhibited from requesting particular days off.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) made a strong case—as he did in his contribution to the House in 2014, which I read in preparation for this debate—in terms of productivity. I found it quite interesting, and I will return to it later. He also discussed, as did a number of other Members, the fact that public holidays are not fixed in the way that we might assume they are. Easter, for example, moves from year to year, although it does fall on the weekends, which makes it slightly easier to plan for in advance, as there is an established pattern.

There is merit in the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that employers could have some flexibility to cater for different religious holidays. That is something that the Government could encourage public sector employers to look at, without the need for any legislative changes. It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). He clearly stated his support for more public holidays. He was sceptical about the arguments about financial costs, which I will return to later. I agree that it should not be beyond the wit of most employers to grant holidays for staff to be able to observe religious festivals—after all, a full-time employee in this country is entitled to 28 days a year, which is over two days a month. That should be enough latitude for most employers to be able to deal with any requests.

I thank my hon. Friend for enlightening me on the background to some of these religious occasions and their significance. He spoke about personal days in the United States—an interesting example that I am not aware of, but I will look into it. However, we already have 28 days allocated to employees, which I think ought to be more than sufficient to cope with the kind of issues we are discussing.

This is the first debate I have responded to as the interim shadow Minister, and I welcome the opportunity it gives me to reflect on the huge contribution made to this country by people of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths, and also the many other religions that contribute to the diversity and economic wellbeing of our country. However, we cannot accept the contribution of these extremely important communities without recognising, as we do in this House, the festivals of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Diwali and Dussehra. We also recognise that they are an important and integral part of each of those communities’ faiths.

I have had the pleasure—as I am sure many hon. Members have—of joining Muslim friends at an Eid al-Fitr, which is also known as the feast of fast breaking. It is not only a spiritual time, but one of community and celebration. It brings people together in my own community in very important ways for cohesion and tolerance. Anyone who has had the pleasure of being involved in or invited to a Diwali celebration knows that it is a fantastic occasion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West said, it symbolises the victory over evil and the victory of light over darkness, which has parallels with many other religions.

While Muslims and Hindus represent the largest religious groupings in this country after Christians, there are many other faiths, some of which we have mentioned today—for example, Buddhism and Judaism. Those communities’ faiths are just as important to them as those of any other religious group are to its members, and it is important for those faiths to have the same opportunities to participate in ceremonies of significance for them. I appreciate that their numbers as a proportion of the population as a whole are smaller, but that does not make their faith any less important.

That raises the question of whether there should be an absolute threshold for official recognition of public holidays for religious festivals. When one considers that one in four people does not subscribe to any faith at all—they are by far the biggest group in this country after Christians—arguments on the basis of numbers begin to look slightly less robust.

Therefore, a better approach is to ensure that all employers, including those who run business models that do not consider the people who work for them to
be employees, recognise the importance of faith and religious festivals, and are as flexible as they can be, to accommodate the beliefs of their employees. Happy workers, respected workers and valued workers are, I hope, productive workers, so there is a clear benefit to the employers and the wider economy in recognising and respecting the importance of these festivals when decisions are made about annual leave.

It is not just about time off for religious holidays. There are also periods of fasting during daylight hours, or required prayers at certain times of day, which are just as important as annual festivals. That opens up a series of very complex issues, for which it is not practical to legislate in each and every instance. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the onus is on employers to do what they can to facilitate people observing their particular religions. It is useful to remind ourselves that discrimination against individuals on the grounds of religion or belief is unlawful. The official ACAS advice sums up the situation well:

“Many religions have specific days or periods throughout the year that involve additional religious observances for followers. The nature, duration and requirements vary depending upon the holy day or religious festival, and can also vary depending on the personal religious beliefs of an individual. It is useful for both employees and employers to give thought to any impact this may have in the workplace, as simple and well-planned arrangements can help manage everyone’s expectations.”

It is about being considerate, communicating and, on occasion, compromising. Our workplaces should be places of tolerance. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said that people have reported that they felt that it was risky to ask their employers for time off—a very sad state of affairs.

The main thrust of the e-petition is the case for public holidays for specific religious festivals and, although I am not persuaded—for reasons that I have given—that additional public holidays should be attached to particular religious occasions, I am convinced that, overall, there is a case for a greater number of public holidays than we currently enjoy. As we have heard, at present we have the lowest number of bank holidays in the EU, where the overall average is 12, while further afield, Japan has 16 days and India has 18. Even within the UK, England and Wales do slightly worse than Scotland and Northern Ireland.

As I am sure hon. Members know, Labour’s manifesto made clear that St George’s day, which is England’s national day as well as Shakespeare’s birthday, would be made a public holiday, along with St David’s day, St Andrew’s day and St Patrick’s day. We believe that those holidays will give workers a chance to spend time with their families and friends in their communities, as well as the opportunity to celebrate the national cultures of our proud nations.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, the counter-argument is that bank holidays cost the economy, but I think it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact economic impact. For example, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport estimated that the impact of the diamond jubilee on GDP would be somewhere between a gain of £1.1 billion and a loss of £3.6 billion. For just one day in the calendar to produce such a wide range in estimated economic impact shows how difficult it is to put a precise figure on this.

People are not economically inactive on such days. Certain sectors, such as hospitality, retail, leisure and tourism will undoubtedly benefit, and in addition, the Bank of England believes that economic activity is more likely to be delayed than lost. The logical conclusion of accepting the economic loss argument would be that we should have no public holidays at all, but that would ignore the wider benefits of a rested and balanced workforce and the inconvenient fact that we have a lower number of public holidays and lower productivity than most of our major competitors, as most hon. Members have mentioned.

Measured by output per hour, productivity in the UK is 13% below the G7 average, and since 2010 productivity growth in the UK has more or less stalled. As the excellent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research’s Commission on Social Justice made clear, the roots of our productivity crisis lie far deeper than the number of hours a person works in a particular week. As hon. Members have said, if predictions of significant job losses due to automation and artificial intelligence are correct, should we not begin to consider whether that shift in working patterns is an opportunity to enable everyone to have more leisure time?

When the Minister responds, I am sure she will not agree about the merits of increasing the number of bank holidays. Does she have any up-to-date information as to why? What recent and detailed assessment have the Government made of the number of bank holidays in Britain? What assessment has been made about whether holidays are spaced in the most effective way? What is the Government’s latest assessment of the benefits and costs to the UK of any additional bank holidays?

Bank holidays, like all our statutory annual leave, are beneficial only if workers are able to enjoy them. They are normally included as part of a full-time employee’s 28 days annual leave, as guaranteed by the Working Time Regulations 1998, but concern has rightly been raised in some quarters that our impending exit from the European Union could result in a weakening of workers’ rights, particularly given the number of prominent Conservative Members who argued during the referendum campaign that the laws emanating from Europe on annual leave should be scrapped. Even the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), said in 2011:

“Britain should secure a total opt-out from the Working Time Directive and scrap the UK Regulations, ensuring that this costly, anti-jobs legislation cannot cause further damage to the economy.”

When the Minister responds, I am sure that she will be keen to put on the record an absolute commitment that the Working Time Regulations 1998, as currently adhered to in this country, will not be scrapped, watered down or altered in any way when we leave the EU; that the full-time entitlement to 28 days paid leave as a minimum will continue; that entitlement to daily and weekly rest breaks will continue; and that holiday entitlement will continue to accrue during maternity, paternity and adoption leave and while a worker is off sick.

Holiday entitlement does not cover the whole UK workforce. People who are self-employed are in a different situation. In principle, they can take leave when they want—
Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I have given the hon. Gentleman some latitude, but we are talking about a petition and not general working time directives or other things. He should confine his remarks to the need for the petition to be discussed.

Justin Madders: Thank you, Mrs Main.

I was merely explaining that some workers in the gig economy, who are perhaps falsely labelled as self-employed, may not be able to take advantage of holiday entitlements. Has the Minister made an assessment of the number of people denied the right to annual holidays as a result of being incorrectly labelled as self-employed?

In theory, flexibility should mean that there is no issue, but we have heard too many tales of one-sided flexibility. It is important that people of every religion have the right to exercise their religious observance, regardless of their employment status. What steps have been taken to ensure that those employed on zero-hours contracts or in agency work are not subsequently penalised for taking time off to observe religious festivals? With so much work in the gig economy dictated by algorithms on a phone, what steps can the Government take to ensure that no particular religion is disadvantaged by the way those apps operate? That is important, because those apps work only as well as the information that is submitted to them. I am not sure that it is clear that software programmers would think about religious observance when they are working on those apps.

The real problem is enforcement. Rights are only as strong as an individual’s ability to exercise them. To raise concerns about holiday entitlement requires cases to be taken up with an employment tribunal, which until recently attracted a fee imposed by the Government. Even without the fee structure, where cases are complex, enforcement is not observed? Could the Department ensure that no particular religion is disadvantaged by the way those apps operate? That is important, because those apps work only as well as the information that is submitted to them. I am not sure that it is clear that software programmers would think about religious observance when they are working on those apps.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I have given the hon. Gentleman some latitude, but we are talking about a petition and not general working time directives or other things. He should confine his remarks to the need for the petition to be discussed.

Justin Madders: I would suggest that it is important to look at all forms of workplace structure—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I am struggling to see how that is relevant. The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting remarks, but if he could confine them to the need to have holidays for religious observance, as the petition outlines, I would be grateful. I would like to hear the Minister’s response to that part of the debate.

Justin Madders: I would suggest that it is important to look at all forms of workplace structure—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. And, I would suggest, so long as it is in line with the debate that is on the table.

Justin Madders: I am coming to a conclusion anyway.

Will the Minister look at occasions where holiday entitlement is not observed? Could the Department adopt a naming and shaming policy, as it has for minimum wage cases?

In conclusion, the debate has reminded us of the need to recognise the importance of respecting and facilitating the opportunity for people of all faiths to observe their religious festivals, but also to think more broadly about the importance of being able to access the right to paid leave.

6.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Main. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) as Opposition spokesperson for the first time. It is good to be here.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) not only for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, but for his thoughtful and informative speech. I thank the other hon. Members who have taken part, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). It was great to hear how he led the charge for a similar debate in 2014. He is a big champion of the diverse community in Harrow East. I am also grateful to the people who signed the e-petitions that have brought us here today.

I am proud that we are one of the world’s most successful multi-ethnic, multi-faith societies. We should all be proud of that diversity, which is at the heart of our economic success. It has made us the strong, vibrant nation we are today.

The Government welcome the celebration of Diwali, Eid and other religious festivals. This year, the festival of Diwali will take place on 7 November and I send my best wishes to everyone who will be celebrating in Britain and around the world. Downing Street will host its Diwali celebration on 15 November.

Bob Blackman: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, who is rightly extolling the virtues of Diwali. We will be celebrating Diwali in Parliament on Wednesday. I have the honour of hosting the event on the Terrace. She and all hon. Members are welcome to join us between 4 o’clock and 6 o’clock. Equally, as she is keen to understand the importance of these days, I invite her to join me on Hindu new year’s day, when I shall be visiting no fewer than 11 temples and celebrating with the people who are celebrating that key day.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for the invite. Last year or the year before, I attended a similar event, so I look forward to attending this year. I also thank him very much for his invitation to visit 11 different temples; I am not too sure whether I can agree to that at this point, but—

Bob Blackman: One is enough.

Kelly Tolhurst: One is enough, but I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation. As he highlighted earlier, many parliamentarians throughout the country will celebrate that day with their constituents, as he will, and they will ensure that they are present at a lot of these events.

As Members will know, the current pattern of bank holidays is well established. There are eight permanent bank and public holidays in England and Wales. Scotland has nine and Northern Ireland has 10. The Banking
and Financial Dealing Act 1971 allows for dates to be changed or other holidays to be declared. This allows for holidays to be declared to celebrate special occasions or one-off events.

The Government regularly receive requests for additional bank and public holidays to celebrate a wide variety of occasions. Recent requests have included public holidays to commemorate our armed forces, to mark particular royal events and to celebrate certain sporting successes. We carefully consider every request that we receive.

Although the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk has made a powerful case today, the Government do not believe that it is necessary for such extra bank holidays to be declared, for reasons that I will now outline. First, the costs to the economy of introducing new public holidays are considerable. The most recent assessment of an additional holiday for the diamond jubilee, which has been spoken about today, showed a total cost to employers of around £1.2 billion. Depending on the nature of the holiday that is being proposed, costs may be partially offset by increased revenues for businesses in the leisure and tourism sectors, and by a boost in retail spending. However, it is not expected that public holidays for Eid or Diwali would result in an increase in tourism.

Although bank holidays have become widely observed, workers do not have a legal right to take time off for specific bank holidays or to receive extra pay for them; that depends on the terms of their employment agreement and contract. In the UK, full-time workers receive a minimum annual leave entitlement of 28 days. That is a combination of eight days to represent bank holidays and the EU minimum annual leave of 20 days. The extra eight days of leave do not need to be taken on bank holidays themselves, giving workers flexibility. Many employers offer extra leave entitlement on top of the statutory minimum.

It is at the heart of the Government’s quality of work agenda to encourage employers to respond flexibly and sympathetically to any requests for leave, including for religious holidays. The relationship between the worker and the manager is a key aspect of good quality work. Part of a sound relationship is mutual respect and a willingness to accommodate a worker’s religious or cultural commitments.

I will now touch on a few points that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk made. Discrimination in the workplace is not tolerated and is completely unacceptable, so I was very sad to hear about some of the issues that he raised and about some of the feelings that individuals have expressed, which he referred to in his speech.

The hon. Gentleman made an interesting point about swapping religious festivals, but, as I outlined earlier, people do not necessarily have to take bank holidays off, so there is flexibility with the annual leave entitlement for people to make use of that time on their own particular religious holidays.

However, the heart of the argument is around making sure that we do all we can, as a Government, to ensure that employers are sympathetic to the needs of their workers. As everyone who has spoken here today has outlined, the key to the success of companies and businesses is the happiness of their employees. As a Government, we will continue to encourage business to respect people’s views and meet their needs.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of education, which is an important part of this debate. I can only speak about my own experience from when I was at school. Even then, in the ’70s—well, in the ’80s, I should say—[Interruption.] Yes, I was at school in the ’80s. Actually, I benefited at my comprehensive school from a really good religious education, which did not just focus on Christianity; it covered all the other major religions that are present in this country, too. So I found that, both at school and after I left school, I was in an environment that was very multicultural, even in the ’80s, and I believe that I left school with a good understanding of many of the religions that we have spoken about today. Nevertheless, that is something that we must keep abreast of, and I am sure that the Department for Education will welcome the questions that have been put to it today.

I will just mention a couple of points that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East made. He is a strong champion for his constituency and it was great to hear him also talking about Jewish holidays and his constituency. He mentioned the need for employers to understand and to be sympathetic to the needs of particular individuals, and we will continue to monitor that.

I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who is another strong champion for his constituency, for his contribution. However, even though he was very determined that he wants to increase the number of public holidays, I am yet to be convinced about the type of extension that he suggested. Nevertheless, it was great that he was able to make his point.

Finally, I will touch on the contribution by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. As I have outlined, we receive a lot of requests for different holidays. We have had requests for St George’s day and an “EU independence” day, and very recently there was a request regarding Harry and Meghan’s wedding. I am sure that the requests for new bank holidays will continue as time goes on, and I am also sure that all the constituents out there would always relish the thought of another day off work. The hon. Gentleman also talked about employers’ awareness of religion, and that is key to what I will come on to later.

I noticed that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that bank holidays could be directly relatable to the productivity of employees, and I think that is a theory that might be tested. However, he also mentioned that with our move to new technology, such as artificial intelligence and robots, there will definitely be job losses. The Government are committed to ensuring that we can provide an economy, a workplace and the skills and jobs that will keep people employed. I am not yet convinced that we need to establish more bank holidays on the back of that change, but he probably has a counterargument.

I will make two quick points to address some of the hon. Gentleman’s other comments. First, I understand that he has asked some questions around the assessment of the cost of bank holidays. Since I became the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I have not done that assessment, but it would be an interesting area to consider. However, I would always argue that the costs that have been established
could be, in reality, potentially higher, so it would be interesting to see who was right and who was wrong on that point.

Regarding our leaving Europe, we have been clear on workers’ rights. As we leave Europe, this Government have been clear that we will not make any concessions in relation to the workers’ rights that we already have, and that we want to ensure that our workers’ rights are protected and built upon. I think that the Prime Minister has been very clear on that.

On the hon. Gentleman’s comment about self-employment, and self-employed people not necessarily being able to benefit from bank holidays, the whole essence of being self-employed is around the flexibility of work; self-employed people are not subjected to the same restraints as full-time employees with regard to their holiday entitlement. So, although he makes a point around self-employment, self-employed individuals actually have a lot more flexibility than others do, particularly to enjoy the religious festivals that they may want to observe.

Justin Madders: The point about self-employment is that many people are genuinely self-employed, but a group of people, particularly in the gig economy, do not have the same flexibilities. It is the situation of those people that I wanted the Minister to address.

Kelly Tolhurst: Flexibility is key for self-employment, but with regard to the group of people he mentions who are working on such contracts, there is a ban on exclusivity and those individuals are still given the opportunity to request the holiday that they are entitled to as flexible workers with accrued entitlements.

In our industrial strategy, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy took responsibility for reporting on and improving the quality of work across the UK. That was a key recommendation of the Taylor review of modern employment practices. In his review, Matthew Taylor set out an overarching ambition that all work in the UK economy should be fair and decent, with realistic scope for development and fulfilment, and that is an ambition of this Government. Although being in employment is vital to people’s health and wellbeing, the quality of the work is also a major factor in helping them to remain healthy and fulfilled.

We know that working flexibly helps people to balance their work and personal lives. Certain approaches to flexible working can allow people to build up additional leave entitlements, to use however they choose. Such flexibility is vital in creating an inclusive economy. Employees with 26 weeks’ continuous service already have the right to request flexible working. That accounts for more than 90% of employees, which sends a clear signal that flexible working is a normal practice for anyone in the workplace and not limited to those with caring responsibilities. The Government would like to take that further. We announced earlier this month that we will consider a new duty on employers to advertise all jobs as flexible, turning the tables on flexible working from something an employee might consider requesting into something an employer will consider offering.

Britain is a great place to live. However, we cannot ignore the fact that in too many parts of our country, communities feel divided. The Government are fully committed to the principles of freedom of religion and belief. I am proud that this country has in place some of the strongest protections in the world to allow people to practise their faith or belief. More than that, we understand that faith communities make a valuable contribution to our society by creating strong social networks, supporting vulnerable people, undertaking charitable work and providing education. We continue to support interfaith work as a means of breaking down barriers between communities and building greater trust and understanding.

Since 2011, the Government have funded the Church Urban Fund’s near neighbours programme, which brings people from diverse faiths and backgrounds together to increase trust and understanding. More than 1,600 local community integration projects have been funded, across 40 local authority areas, and more than a million people have benefited. We also fund the work of the Inter Faith Network for the UK, to facilitate dialogue between faith communities and run the annual interfaith week.

Our industrial strategy commits us to doing more to address the under-representation of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the labour market. That is good for society and good for business. The McGregor-Smith review estimated that equal employment and progression across ethnicities could be worth £24 billion to the UK economy per year. I encourage employers to look at the review. It provides concrete actions that can be taken to identify and tackle any workplace barriers. As an example, it sets out how staff networks can be a forum for the discussion of how a business can take account of holidays or festivals in an equitable way.

On 11 October, Business in the Community published a one-year-on report on progress against the review’s recommendations. Although there were areas of progress, and significant effort from the Government and employers, I was disappointed to see that that was not always reflected in employees’ lived experiences. One in four employees from a minority ethnic background had witnessed or experienced racial harassment or bullying from managers in the previous two years—an appalling statistic. Only 35% of people felt comfortable talking about their religion in their organisation, and only 38% felt comfortable talking about race. We must ensure that workplaces are comfortable places for the discussion of difference, so that everyone can contribute their perspectives and experiences.

The Prime Minister launched the race in the workplace charter on 11 October, through which organisations sign up to five practical calls for action to ensure that they are tackling barriers faced by people from ethnic minorities in the workplace. The charter builds on a number of the recommendations of the McGregor-Smith review, and I encourage employers to sign up to it.

All this afternoon’s contributions have been informative and respectful. It has been a great debate and I thank all the constituency MPs who have spoken. I know that there will be disappointment that the Government have been unable to support the e-petitions for public holidays for Eid and Diwali, but I have welcomed the opportunity to set out our commitment to a fair and flexible workplace for all. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk for introducing the debate today.
Martyn Day: We have had a very interesting debate, and Members have made some very good points. I am very grateful to the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for their contributions. They added some good points, such as the situation with Brent Council’s diary and the idea of paid personal days.

There can be no doubt that the percentage of our society’s population that is of other faiths is increasing, so perhaps, as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) suggested, there needs to be a threshold for such holidays at a future point. There is certainly much work that we need to do between now and then. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some very good points about education and the need to work with employers, and that is definitely a way forward. I am encouraged by some of the Minister’s comments regarding the new duty on employers and the work being done to tackle workplace barriers, and we need to ensure that that information is relayed to all employers out there.

We pride ourselves on being a tolerant and inclusive society, but we cannot be complacent and must all take on a leadership role. Clearly, as the petitions indicate, many people do not feel as included or valued as we want them to, so we must do extra work to remove barriers. One of the points I made, which I hope the Minister will pass on to the Education Ministers, is the issue of exam timetables; I will certainly write to Scottish counterparts about that as well.

There is a lot more we can do to ensure that communities can celebrate together, not just within their own faith but across faiths, and I look forward to taking part in a number of such celebrations over the coming years, as I have in the past. Now that I know the date for the hon. Member for Harrow East’s event, I will be coming along to stick my head in and show some support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 220501 and 221860 relating to holding public holidays on religious occasions.

6.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Ovarian Cancer: Diagnosis and Treatment

9.30 am

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ovarian cancer diagnosis and treatment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate, as well as everyone who is here to support this important and timely event—both my colleagues in the Chamber, and everyone in the Public Gallery. The issue is extremely important, and I am privileged to open the debate. This will be the first time since 2014 that ovarian cancer has been debated in either Chamber.

Ovarian cancer is a quiet, invasive cancer, that robs wives, daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers of years of their lives, often unexpectedly and quickly, with devastating impacts on their families. Today about 25,000 women are living with the cancer and every day 20 will be diagnosed with it. Despite some progress in recent years the disease still takes away the lives of 4,000 women a year, and hundreds of thousands around the world. Because of its devastating effects its survival rate is, tragically, not as high as everyone would like, and 46% of sufferers do not survive for five years or more.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. To improve survival rates, we need earlier diagnosis. For many years ovarian cancer was known as the silent killer, but there are a number of signs and symptoms. Will he join me in encouraging anyone with those signs and symptoms to see their GP urgently?

Lee Rowley: I absolutely will. That is a timely and important point. I was on Radio Sheffield only this morning talking about the debate with someone from Target Ovarian Cancer. We spent an awfully long time talking about the symptoms, because it is important that people understand them, and are aware of them, so they can get the treatment they need if they are, unfortunately, affected.

All cancers are important. Extremely sadly—sometimes tragically—ovarian cancer tends not to receive the bulk of the attention or funding. That is partly because it does not affect as many people as other cancers, but it is also because of survival rates. The 46% rate of survival beyond five years compares unfavourably with the rate for breast cancer, which is 87%, and prostate cancer, which is 85%. There are simply fewer survivors of ovarian cancer in the UK who could highlight the importance of fighting the disease and succeeding than there are survivors of other cancers. There is a need for people to speak up about ovarian cancer. Thanks to the work of those who are doing so, it has started to receive the attention that it needs. Charities such as Target Ovarian Cancer work tirelessly every day to raise the profile of the disease, support those who have been affected, improve diagnosis and treatment, and work for a cure. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer, and in particular the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who chairs it. It has been a privilege to be involved in the work and I am grateful to be able to help in a small way.

What is it about ovarian cancer that requires a particular focus? From the work I have seen, there are four things: improving awareness of the disease, as the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) mentioned, so that it can be caught earlier; speeding up the diagnosis when it is suspected that someone has the disease; improving the data available for tracking the disease and our progress in the fight against it; and improving the treatment, allowing people to recover and be disease-free more quickly.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): On the point about early diagnosis, my constituent and good friend Jane Sagar had a cyst of 6.5 cm, which a specialist identified. However, its removal was not recommended, although she was later told that any cyst greater than 5 cm on her ovary should automatically have been removed, because it was likely to be cancerous. As a result she is entering her fourth year of treatment for advanced ovarian cancer.

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Treatment around the country needs to be made more consistent and clearer, to put a stop to the issues that many of us have heard in stories from constituents.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I apologise that I shall not be able to stay for the whole of this important debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that the additional resources that the Government are devoting to the NHS are welcome, and that it is important for it to use them wisely, which includes improving early diagnosis and treatment of cancer? Early diagnosis is crucial to successful outcomes and the raising of survival rates for ovarian and other cancers.

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is right and I hope that the Minister will recognise that. It is a matter of getting a diagnosis, and encouraging people who feel that something may not be quite right to go to the doctor, so that the pathway starts. Then, if there is an issue—most of the time there is not—there can be progress, and people can get the treatment they need earlier.

The first step in improving outcomes on ovarian cancer is improving awareness among the general public, and among GPs and in doctors’ surgeries in general. As has been mentioned, the symptoms of ovarian cancer are often easy to mistake for something else. Too often it is easy to dismiss them as inconsequential or not worth further attention. Symptoms include bloating, a need to go to the toilet more frequently, pain in the tummy or always feeling full. Recognising that those symptoms are potentially problematic is a key to survival. Those diagnosed at the earliest stage, stage 1, are almost
certain to be alive a year after the diagnosis; 98% of them will be. Only half of those diagnosed at stage 4 are alive a year later.

Awareness of the symptoms among the general public remains low. For example, only 20% of women can name bloating as a symptom, and only 3% can name feeling full and loss of appetite as an issue. A regional Be Clear on Cancer pilot on ovarian cancer symptoms in 2014 was promising. There was an increase in both spontaneous and prompted awareness of the issues. There were also promising findings from a further regional pilot last year, which focused on abdominal symptoms, including bloating. Initial findings showed that the campaign led to an increase in the number of GP referrals for suspected cancer. We ask that if the Government propose to run any future public health campaigns, they should include work to make people aware of those symptoms.

The second area where there is work to be done is diagnosis, not least because 45% of women reported that it took three months or longer from first presenting to their GP with concerns to recognition that they might have an issue. Diagnosis relies on two forms of assessment—an ultrasound and a blood test called CA125. In too many areas the assessments are done sequentially rather than simultaneously, which often means vital weeks are lost. We have urged the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the NHS to review that process and extend the coverage of multidisciplinary diagnostic centres. Those centres prove very useful for the sort of cancers that hide behind vague, less common symptoms, which it is important to get to the bottom of as quickly as possible.

The third area is data. There are many calls on the Government from many sources to ensure that the cancer dashboard demonstrates the progress already being made on a variety of cancers. I understand the challenge, but we also hope that in time the Government may look favourably on the idea of including ovarian cancer data in the dashboard. We hope that that would be relatively simple, as much of the data is already available; it may look favourably on the idea of including ovarian cancer data in the dashboard. We hope that that would be relatively simple, as much of the data is already collected and published elsewhere. Good data is vital in driving forward and improving early diagnosis. Huge strides have been made in its collection, and making it available would help with the continuing work to drive up standards.

Finally, treatment also requires further attention. As with many health issues, ovarian cancer treatment is invasive and often difficult. It centres primarily on surgery and chemotherapy. There has been much progress in recent years on drugs to treat the cancer, with the development of a number of PARP inhibitors, providing new tools and opportunities to improve the outcome. However, spending and research on ovarian cancer remain lower than for other cancers, and there is much work to focus on. Where surgery is required there is a strong case for specialist centres around the country, supported by a detailed service specification from NHS England.

To further drive up the quality of treatment, charities such as Target Ovarian Cancer and Ovarian Cancer Action, together with the British Gynaecological Cancer Society, are funding an ovarian cancer feasibility audit. Over the next two years, it will map and analyse existing data on ovarian cancer, and look at the treatment provided and the outcomes for women.
Seren started feeling unwell while at university, aged just 19. Unable to get a doctor’s appointment, she came back home and was diagnosed with cancer. Her tumour was the size of a rugby ball and her operation was pushed forward as it was stopping her eating and affecting her breathing. Chemotherapy followed and today Seren is recovered and working for a cancer charity.

Christine is also one of the good news stories. She was diagnosed with stage 2 ovarian cancer aged 35, having had to visit three different GPs to resolve the problems she was suffering from, which had initially been put down to colitis and anxiety. After her diagnosis, an emergency operation and 10 chemotherapy sessions followed. That was in 1985 and Christine is still here; she has been able to share her story in the last few days.

Finally, Linda was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in September 2017, having initially felt unwell at the beginning of summer while she was on holiday. The classic symptoms were there: bloating, feeling full and knowing that something “wasn’t right”. Multiple trips to the GP followed until, finally, a blood test was taken, confirming the cancer. Linda had a full hysterectomy that same month and spent much of the next few months recovering.

I know that many hon. Members may be wondering the obvious: why am I standing here making the case about a disease that cannot and will not ever affect my body? As with so many others, although it may not have touched me personally, it has touched my family. Linda is my mum. Up until last year, she had had relatively good health and there is no history of ovarian cancer in my family. I generally try to keep my family out of the news, but last year was a nightmare that none of us would ever wish upon another family. My dad, my brother and I watched my mum live through an extremely scary diagnosis, hugely invasive treatment and one of the brush with mortality that takes time for sufferers to get to grips with.

Happily for me and my family, my mum is one of the lucky ones. She is sitting at home in north Derbyshire right now, possibly watching this debate on the internet. She is lucky to have a family who have had relatively good health and there is no history of ovarian cancer in my family. I generally try to keep my family out of the news, but last year was a nightmare that none of us wants to experience again, and we have no wish to see anyone else experience the same. My dad, my brother and I watched my mum live through an extremely scary diagnosis, hugely invasive treatment and one of the brush with mortality that takes time for sufferers to get to grips with.

Before I continue, I would like to share a bit of welcome news for ovarian cancer patients in Northern Ireland. As colleagues may be aware, drugs approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for use through the cancer drugs fund in England are now being considered in line with the country’s existing endorsement of NICE recommendations and will be considered in Northern Ireland. That has just been announced recently. In cases where a drug is yet to be fully approved by NICE, it can be made available for use under the CDF. I will mention one lady who is no longer with us, Una Crudden, who I got to know when she met us here, as someone who had had ovarian cancer. I think it was six years after her diagnosis. She was a remarkable lady and her story was a very real one: I remember it probably every day of my life.

CDF-approved drugs were previously unavailable in Northern Ireland, meaning that patients had to wait for their full approval by NICE, which can take up to two years. This change in Northern Ireland will help more people to survive, and for longer.

Every single year, more than 7,000 women across the United Kingdom receive the devastating news that they have ovarian cancer. The hon. Gentleman, in his examples at the end of his speech, referred to those who have survived and those who have not; it is important to realise that sometimes people do survive it. Unfortunately, in my time as an elected representative, most of the people I have known who have had it have caught it at a late stage and have not lived as long as perhaps they could have. UK survival rates are among the lowest in Europe and less than half of all women diagnosed with ovarian cancer survive five years or longer.

The fact that we are at the lower end of that league table is an indication that perhaps we need to do more. I look to the Minister, as we always do, for a positive response. We also know that the earlier a person is diagnosed, the better chance they have of beating the disease. More than a quarter of women with ovarian cancer are diagnosed through an emergency presentation, for example via accident and emergency. The hon. Gentleman referred to those who thought they had irritable bowel syndrome, had a bad stomach or were bloated, or whatever it might be, and suddenly found it was something much greater. Over 80% of women diagnosed following a GP referral will survive for a year or more. I think if an early diagnosis can be made, the figures speak for themselves. We must do more to raise awareness about the disease, something I will come on to later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing this debate. He is right that ovarian cancer does not affect us men, but it affects people we know, and that is why we are here. I thank him for his introduction and for the extensive work he has done on the issue in his role as vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer. I was particularly impressed by the group’s report, “Diagnosing ovarian cancer sooner: what more can be done?”. If hon. Members have not had a chance to read it, I suggest that they do so, because it is very helpful. It was published earlier this year and contains a number of key recommendations and findings, which I will pick up on today.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Whenever ladies go through this treatment, their aftercare and companionship with other people is important. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating a lady in my constituency, Mrs Maureen Clarke, who set up the Angels of Hope charity some years ago? It has been a tremendous help, psychologically and in every other way, for people who suffer from ovarian cancer.
Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly support the tremendous work of the great many people in charities and elsewhere. Una Crudden was one of those who inspired everyone around her. We think of her often.

Without CDF approval, cancer patients in Northern Ireland have been unable to access life-extending drugs that have been approved for use in England, Wales and Scotland, such as niraparib. It is a PARP inhibitor, meaning that it blocks the action of the enzymes PARP1 and PARP2, which help to repair any damaged DNA in cancer cells while they divide to make new cells. Niraparib blocks PARP enzymes, which is incredibly important, and it is good news that we will have direct access to it in Northern Ireland. When researchers trialled niraparib on women with ovarian cancer, they discovered that the women lived for longer without the disease worsening and could go significantly increased times between treatments, meaning that they had more time between chemotherapy sessions.

Almost 200 women in Northern Ireland are diagnosed with ovarian cancer every year, and more than 50% lose their battle with it. It is particularly frustrating and upsetting for patients, and their families, who did not have access to the same potentially life-changing drugs as their English, Scottish and Welsh counterparts. However, that has changed in the last month; patients in Northern Ireland are finally set to have the same access to drugs as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. According to reports, the implementation of this policy will take place at some point in this financial year. We look forward to that. I am sure that colleagues will join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) in welcoming this fantastic news.

Access to drugs is one thing, but it is reactionary, rather than preventive. Evidence, including in the APPG’s report, suggest that much more needs to be done to raise awareness about ovarian cancer, which could affect the number of people diagnosed with the disease. Early diagnoses give longer life and prevent death. Although not limited to these, the four main symptoms are abdominal pain, bloating, feeling full quickly and needing to pass water. Most concerning is that only 20% of women could correctly identify those as being symptomatic of ovarian cancer, which goes back to a point made by the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire.

Ovarian cancer has low survival rates and, sometimes, delays in diagnosis, so we need a reinvigorated effort to ensure that the general public know what to look out for and when to see a doctor. The Be Clear on Cancer campaign was introduced in 2011, and I take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to Public Health England for launching it. It is an excellent campaign that has undoubtedly played a vital role in improving cancer awareness more generally among the general population, which is part of the strategy’s focus.

National campaigns have been successfully run for bowel, lung, breast, bladder and kidney cancers, but only regional and local pilot campaigns have been launched for ovarian cancer. Does the Minister intend to launch a pilot campaign for ovarian cancer? A regional campaign launched in 2014 included the use of television, radio, online and face-to-face events and led to a significant improvement in women’s awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer and a greater inclination to visit their GP to discuss any concerns that they might have.

Raising awareness—especially about potential symptoms—is obviously important and can only be a good thing, so I will be grateful if the Minister indicates what discussions he has had with Public Health England about the possibility of running a national campaign for ovarian cancer that covers the four nations. We could work together to raise awareness at every level. I always think it is better to do things together. As you know, Mr Bone, we are better together in everything that we do, and I would like that to continue to be the case, especially for this.

Another way to improve awareness about ovarian cancer would be the introduction of a national screening programme. Screening programmes exist for breast and cervical cancer, but there is no equivalent for ovarian cancer. I understand that the UK collaborative trial of ovarian cancer screening looked at the possibility of an ovarian cancer screening programme, with a blood test to identify changes in the levels of the CA 125 protein, which is a tell-tale sign. If levels had risen, the patient would be sent for an ultrasound, so a system would be in place to offer early diagnosis, and it would be preventive as well. It is estimated that, if a national screening programme were rolled out, 12.5 million women over the age of 50 would be eligible to attend, with around 2% required to have a further ultrasound. Such a programme could take preventive help to the next stage.

I understand that, when women are contacted about making an appointment for a cervical or breast cancer screening, they are provided with informative leaflets that detail possible symptoms. Of course, although the screenings are vital, it is entirely up to the patient if they follow up and make an appointment. However, just having access to the leaflets is helpful in raising awareness. Does the Minister intend to produce a leaflet to raise awareness of ovarian cancer? Recognition of the symptoms of ovarian cancer remains low, so it would be helpful if women were provided with a similar leaflet that might help to improve awareness of this specific disease.

I understand that the cost of national screening programmes is high, but that needs to be measured against the long-term benefits. If people can be screened and ovarian cancer caught early, people have a greater chance of survival, and their long-term reliance on the NHS could well be reduced. That is ultimately cost-effective, because it reduces the amount of care that they later need.

I understand that one concern with rolling out a screening programme of that nature is the lack of sonographers, who are of course required to provide ultrasounds. Are the staff with those skills in place? I am interested to hear what consideration has been given to the use of artificial intelligence to fill the gap of highly skilled diagnosticians. Would it be possible to provide some sort of incentive for those considering postgraduate UK ultrasound qualifications? We often say this, and I know that the Minister is responsive to it, but if we set out the graduate positions that will be available in the future and encourage graduates to study towards those jobs, that will be helpful.

Prevention is vital. Approximately 15% of women with ovarian cancer develop it as a result of a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. Identifying women with ovarian cancer with a BRCA mutation not only helps in designing their treatment plans; it enables family members to be tested. We sometimes look at the individual,
which is important, but we should also look at the family circle—sisters and daughters and so on—and test them as well, which would allow them to make decisions about reducing their risk of developing ovarian cancer.

"Achieving world-class cancer outcomes: a strategy for England 2015-2020" calls for all women with ovarian cancer to be offered access to genetic testing at the point of diagnosis. That follows 2013 NICE guidelines that require all women with a 10% or higher risk of carrying a BRCA mutation to be offered genetic testing. However, in reality, testing varies between regions and between hospitals, because the guidelines are often interpreted differently. This clearly needs to be addressed, as the same testing should be available for all, without variation depending on postcode or because of the funding—or lack thereof—available in different genetic testing centres across the country. Obviously if eligible family members were tested to identify potential mutations, they might be able to take steps, including surgery, to ensure that ovarian cancer cannot occur.

Concerns have been raised about what genetic testing could mean for individuals with private health or life insurance. Members may not have thought of this, and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire did not mention it, but he and others will be aware of it. For example, does a person with private health or life insurance need to declare if a genetic test has been carried out, and its results? I am interested to hear from the Minister what the Department is doing alongside the insurance industry to address any disparity for cancer patients and their families who undergo genetic testing, which may have an impact on their private health or life insurance.

We can all agree that, while improvements have been made in the last couple of decades, survival rates for ovarian cancer continue to lag behind other cancers. We need to do more to raise awareness of ovarian cancer, to ensure that women know what to look out for and when to see their doctor—particularly those in higher risk categories, either because of family history or because of their age.

I am very pleased about the recent news for cancer patients in Northern Ireland: as is the case with genetic testing, it is unfair for patients to access different treatments, tests or drugs simply because of their postcode. I hope that the Minister will work with Public Health England and NICE to consider national campaigns, which take in all the regions, and screening programmes for ovarian cancer, as well as to ensure that guidelines are implemented and funding made available for testing.

I again thank the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire for the opportunity to speak on this subject. It is close to my heart; indeed, that can be said of all of us who are here and many who are not here because they are doing other things. Ovarian cancer is one of those diseases on which we need to give hope and support to the people affected. We all know people who are affected and we are here today to speak on their behalf.

10 am

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing this important debate and on speaking so compassionately and movingly about his constituents and, indeed, his family.

Like other hon. Members present, I am sure, I was inundated with emails and correspondence from constituents urging me to take part in the debate, so I want to make a few remarks on their behalf. Of course, those emails come from the lucky ones—the women who, like Amanda Gilham from Makerstoun in my constituency, benefited from timely diagnosis and treatment. Amanda was totally unaware that she had ovarian cancer and was diagnosed only because she was fortunate enough to be given a blood test, as her GP suspected that something else entirely was wrong.

When talking about statistics, it is important to remember that the numbers on spreadsheets represent people—our constituents—and, in the case of ovarian cancer, grandmothers, mothers and sometimes daughters. Clearly, early diagnosis and treatment are crucial to tackling ovarian cancer, as they are to tackling all types of cancer. If ovarian cancer is found early, the five-year survival rate is 90%, compared with 4% if it is found late. Although survival rates have doubled in the past 40 years, survival rates in the United Kingdom are lower than the European average, and still not enough people are diagnosed early.

The NHS in Scotland is of course entirely devoted and therefore the responsibility of the Scottish National party Government. I want to spend a little time talking about the situation in Scotland and the circumstances that my constituents have to experience. Patients in Scotland are being let down. Much more needs to be done to improve diagnosis and treatment. This summer, for example, the Scottish Medicines Consortium approved the use of niraparib, but only for women without a gene mutation that affects about one fifth of women living with ovarian cancer. That restriction does not apply in England, meaning that women with a BRCA gene mutation in England and Wales have more treatment options than their counterparts north of the border, in Scotland. A postcode lottery for accessing life-enhancing drugs is unacceptable. I agree with Ovarian Cancer Action that women in Scotland deserve better.

Women in Scotland also deserve better in terms of the time that it takes to receive a diagnosis and treatment. Scotland’s cancer treatment waiting times are at their worst in six years. Only 87% of patients with ovarian cancer started treatment within 62 days of referral. In response, the Scottish Government have admitted that that is “simply not good enough”. Just last week, the Scottish Government announced that they were not planning on meeting their own diagnosis target until at least 2021. That was spun as a new “three-year plan” to meet waiting time targets—something that was supposed to be good news. Given that the SNP has been in charge of the NHS in Scotland for the past 10 years, the Scottish Government’s record, particularly on cancer treatment, deserves further scrutiny. I hope that some of the extra £2 billion a year that the Scottish Government will be receiving to spend on the NHS, thanks to yesterday’s Budget, can be put to good use to reduce those waiting times.

Ovarian cancer is not the most common type of cancer in the United Kingdom and is not easily diagnosed at the moment, but the impact of early diagnosis is significant. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the
Member for North East Derbyshire on securing this important debate. I support the efforts across the United Kingdom to improve diagnosis and treatment of this terrible disease.

10.4 am

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing the debate and on bravely speaking of his own experience and that of his mum, Linda. I am sorry to hear about the experience that his family have had in the past year and I wish Linda well.

I thank hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber for highlighting the issues faced by their constituents. They have talked about both the successes of the health service and the lessons that need to be learned for the future. Healthcare in Scotland is of course devolved to the Scottish Government, so I can only speak to that experience, but ovarian cancer is one of the most common types of cancer in women. It typically affects those who have been through the menopause, and more than 7,000 diagnoses are made each year across the UK. In Scotland, 350 women die of the disease each year.

However, the survival rate for ovarian cancer is high compared with that for other types of cancer and, like other cancer survival rates, it increases with early detection.

One key issue with this disease is that awareness of the symptoms is still low among both GPs and the general population. As we have heard from both sides of the Chamber, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the early signs and to secure an early diagnosis. Most women with ovarian cancer are diagnosed when the disease has, unfortunately, reached an advanced stage.

In many regards, Scotland still leads the way on UK ovarian cancer diagnosis, but there is no denying that there is always more to do in this area. Scotland has improved its diagnostic pathway and the access to much-needed treatments. The SNP Government developed the Detect Cancer Early programme to improve survival rates through diagnosis and treatment at an earlier stage. Scotland has been able to tackle cancer through world-class scientific research. The Scottish Molecular Genetics Consortium uses DNA to detect a range of genetic disorders, including cancer. The Scottish Genomes Consortium is pioneering Scottish research in human genome discovery in four key research areas, of which cancer is one. That partnership involves the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. However, although that research is saving lives, its funding is being slashed. The proportion of EU funds allocated to universities in the UK has already dropped and will continue to fall because of Brexit and the uncertainty about the future. Programmes such as those will collapse unless a post-Brexit Government are prepared to plug the funding gap.

In Scotland, the SNP wants to improve cancer care and treatment, which is one reason the Scottish Government are investing £100 million in their new cancer strategy. In addition to the SNP Government’s work on prevention and early detection, the strategy includes enhanced radiotherapy services through new technology, and recruitment drives to reduce waiting times and improve patient outcomes. The Scottish Government have outlined actions for end-of-life care needs through the “Strategic Framework for Action on Palliative and End of Life Care”, which encourages a culture of openness and dignity around dying and death.

In June, I was contacted by a constituent from Hamilton, Mr Gerard Murphy, who sadly lost his wife, Elizabeth, last year after a battle against late-diagnosed ovarian cancer. Mr Murphy expressed a lot of the sentiments articulated during this debate, calling for publicly funded awareness campaigns so that women and GPs know the symptoms to look out for, faster diagnosis so that women can start treatment earlier and have a greater chance of survival, and treatment in specialist centres such as the Beatson West of Scotland cancer centre, where Elizabeth was treated, in his words, “wonderfully well”. I am sure that Mr Murphy would welcome any advances for other families experiencing this disease.

We have heard calls from both sides of the Chamber for greater knowledge and awareness of the signs and greater investment in early diagnosis. This is something that we would like to tackle across the House. I hope that the Minister will pay heed to the comments that have been made.

10.8 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) for securing this very important debate and for his vice-chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer, which I am extremely proud to chair. We work very well together. Indeed, earlier this year he and I shared the chairing responsibilities for two oral evidence sessions as part of the preparation for publication of our report entitled “Diagnosing ovarian cancer sooner: what more can be done?” to mark World Ovarian Cancer Day 2018. I thank him for that also.

The hon. Gentleman made an excellent and extremely moving opening speech. He shared many examples of women’s lived experiences of this awful disease, including his own experience with his mum Linda. I have no doubt she will be proudly watching him lead this debate. We are all MPs—that’s for sure—but we are also real people with lived experiences and families. Sharing those personal experiences can improve the debate, as it has done today. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for their contributions to this important debate. We have also had some excellent interventions.

Many of the key statistics around this awful disease have been covered so far in this excellent debate, but if something is worth saying once, it is worth saying twice. Over 7,000 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer every year in the UK, but sadly survival rates are among the lowest in Europe. Less than half of women diagnosed with ovarian cancer survive five years or more. Tragically, 4,000 women in the UK die each year because of this awful disease. Although progress has been made in diagnosing and treating ovarian cancer, there is still much more to be done and I want to highlight some ways the Government can do that.
I was extremely grateful to the Minister for meeting with me recently to discuss the key recommendations from the APPG’s report, which I just mentioned, and I will raise some of them now. Diagnosis is one of the key ways that women with ovarian cancer are often let down. Many women report experiencing delays in diagnosis. An astonishingly high proportion, 45%, say that it took three months or even longer to receive a diagnosis after first approaching their GP with symptoms. As we have heard, symptom awareness is one of the key things we must address. This is most concerning because we know the significant impact early diagnosis can have on chances of survival. Nine in 10 women who receive an early diagnosis of ovarian cancer can survive for five years or more, compared with less than five in 100 women who are diagnosed at a very late stage.

I want to share a story, as a few hon. Members have. My constituent Gail wrote to me ahead of this debate telling me the experience of her younger sister, who has stage 3 ovarian cancer that has spread to her stomach lining. Although she is currently responding to treatment, it took a long time to get the diagnosis in the first place. At one point, she was being incorrectly treated for rheumatoid arthritis. That changed only when she developed blood clots in her legs, which led the hospital to look for cancer. We can only imagine the added distress that this kind of delay can cause in an already extremely difficult experience.

As a result of her sister’s diagnosis, Gail underwent genetic testing and discovered that she had the BRCA2 gene, which, as we know, gives her a high predisposition to ovarian and breast cancer. My constituent underwent elective surgery at the start of the year to remove her ovaries and fallopian tubes, and is awaiting the next step with regard to the breast cancer risk. This case shows how important it is that patients are diagnosed as soon as possible, not only for themselves, but for their family members who may have to undergo further testing.

On early diagnosis, will the Minister support a review of the referral pathway for ovarian cancer, particularly in relation to the introduction of the shortened pathway that we have seen in Scotland, so that, as the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire also requested, the CA125 blood tests and ultrasound tests can be done at the same time, rather than sequentially, as they are now? What steps has the Department taken to ensure that NICE guidelines, which say that women should be offered BRCA testing at diagnosis, are adhered to? Ovarian Cancer Action found that 30% of women are not being offered this testing. I know that the new multidisciplinary diagnostic centres will also help with early diagnosis, but they are in the pilot stage and limited to 10 sites. Will the Minister confirm whether there are plans for more centres, so that everyone can have access to those services regardless of where they live?

As we know, the four key symptoms of ovarian cancer are a bloated tummy, needing to urinate more often or urgently, experiencing tummy pain and always feeling full. Anyone newly experiencing those symptoms 12 times a month or more is advised to see their GP. However, awareness of these symptoms is worryingly low. According to Target Ovarian Cancer, just 20% of women can name bloating as a symptom and only 3% can name feeling full or loss of appetite. Awareness campaigns run by Public Health England have been shown to be highly effective. The one currently running focuses on blood in urine. Considering that we know how important it is that those with ovarian cancer are diagnosed quickly, it would be helpful to know whether Public Health England has any plans to run a Be Clear on Cancer campaign that focuses on either ovarian cancer or a cluster of symptoms for a range of cancers, including ovarian.

I recently attended Ovarian Cancer Action’s research grant award ceremony, where I heard about some of the incredible work being funded across the UK. The innovation and determination of some of the projects is truly astonishing. One project—it is hard to describe, but I will give it a go anyway—had a huge number of examples of DNA that needed going through on an individual basis and labelling. Due to the sheer quantity of data that needed sifting, those in charge of the programme invented a Tinder-style app—I know it sounds unusual—that enabled people to quickly categorise the different examples of DNA by swiping left or right. That information was then fed back into the research team’s data, to build up a comprehensive body of data.

Another project that received funding was that of Dr Jonathan Krell and Dr James Flanagan of the Ovarian Cancer Action Research Centre. They are investigating how changes to our genes can play a big part in the risk of developing cancer, including assessing how feasible it would be to implement a new genetic testing model that identifies and supports families at risk of ovarian cancer because of an inherited BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation. With that in mind, does the Minister’s Department have any plans to increase Government funding into medical research for the early detection, diagnosis and prevention of ovarian cancer?

Finally, I want to cover the issue of surgery. As the Minister knows, surgery for ovarian cancer is widely considered one of the biggest factors in survival rates. Surgery for ovarian cancer is extremely difficult. Someone I know well who had the surgery once described it to me as being like trying to remove a bunch of grapes, and if any of the grapes was punctured or broke that would cause huge internal damage by spreading the cancer. Although there are a number of surgical centres of excellence across the UK, there are many women who do not have access to them and are being operated on by general surgeons—no generalist will ever be as good as a specialist. Through no fault of their own, those women will have a lower chance of survival than those who receive the specialist surgery. What assurances can the Minister give that steps are being taken to ensure that all women with ovarian cancer have access to a specialist surgeon and that the regional variation can be brought to an end?

Before I conclude I want to pay tribute to some of the incredible organisations and campaigners that I have had the pleasure of working with on this issue over the years. They work tirelessly not only to combat the disease, but to provide support and comfort to those who have it. They include Ovarian Cancer Action, the Eve Appeal and Target Ovarian Cancer, which also does much to support the work of the APPG on ovarian cancer in its role as the secretariat to the group. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the ways in which the Government can support the work of those
Despite the huge strides that I have mentioned, and the many women to ovarian cancer. We must do better. We lose 12,000 women a year to breast cancer and far too many to ovarian cancer. W atching my hon. Friend brought back memories of sitting in that exact chair as one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer almost exactly seven years ago, in October 2011. I was talking about ovarian cancer, which has also had an impact on my family, although sadly not with the outcome that my hon. Friend currently has. I described it as a “silent national scandal”, which was then trending—quite something in 2011. I was also present for the 2014 debate that he remembers, which was the last time the subject was specifically debated in the House. It was a pleasure to hear him today; he reminded me of me—but I put on record the warning that this is where I have ended up.

I was pleased to meet with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing the debate. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer, the subject means a great deal to him. We also heard more about why it means a lot to him. I place on record my thanks to the all-party group and to the excellent ovarian charities. Target Ovarian Cancer is the biggest, but others work tirelessly in that space, such as Ovacome.

We are three years into that work and cancer survival rates have never been higher, as has been said. About 7,000 people are alive today who would not have been had mortality rates stayed the same as before Cancer Research UK and Harpal, who led the work, published the strategy. As I make clear every time I respond to a debate, however, I know that we must do more and that people want us to do more, because we still lose 12,000 women a year to breast cancer and far too many women to ovarian cancer. We must do better.

Despite the huge strides that I have mentioned, and the best-ever survival rates, ovarian cancer survival rates in the UK are among the lowest in Europe with fewer than half of all women diagnosed surviving five years or more, so there is much that we need to do.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The Minister has mentioned the success rates in dealing with cases of ovarian cancer in our country compared with some of our European partners. Can he set out what we can learn from them in improving outcomes for women in this country?

Steve Brine: I will certainly cover that. Put bluntly, as I will come on to in a second, and as almost all hon. Members have mentioned, it is about early detection. That has an impact because, as the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), has said many times, early diagnosis is cancer’s “magic key”. We have that magic key in some cancers in this country. We do very well in breast cancer, where the early-stage survival rates are well over the 75% target that the Prime Minister set out at the party conference earlier this month, but it is true that we do not yet have the magic key in enough cancers. I will come on to what we need to do.

I was pleased when the Prime Minister announced the ambitious package of measures for cancer care and treatment earlier this month, which will be at the heart of our long-term plan for the NHS. It will be backed up by the new funding that was announced in the summer and confirmed in yesterday’s Budget. We will overhaul screening programmes, provide new investment in state-of-the-art technology to boost our research and innovation capability and, critically, transform how we diagnose cancers earlier. As I have said, our ambition is to diagnose 75% of all cancers at an early stage, which will result in an estimated 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years in England each year from 2028.

All hon. Members have mentioned early diagnosis, and many have mentioned some stats—or the same stats. The important one for me is that a quarter of women with ovarian cancer are diagnosed through an emergency presentation. When I first became an MP, I remember going to meetings with the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer and the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, where I was shown the stats for my constituency of the number of people who presented in the emergency department with cancer. That really frightened and shocked me—it still does—and along with my personal history, it was one of the reasons I wanted to get involved in health and cancer when I joined the House.

Of that quarter of women with ovarian cancer who are diagnosed through an emergency presentation, just 45% survive for a year or more. That is no surprise—if someone is diagnosed in an emergency department, they have exhibited more outward symptoms, so they are at a later stage and their survival rate is lower. The survival rate is more than 80% when women are diagnosed following a GP referral, so it is crystal clear where improvements are urgently required. That is why early diagnosis is a key strategic priority in the cancer strategy. As has been said, it allows for more options for treatment and, crucially, the earlier a cancer is diagnosed, the
more likely it is that doctors will be able to provide successful treatment or operate on the “bunch of grapes”—that is a good analogy, which I have heard before.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire talked about the multidisciplinary diagnostic centres. NHS England and the Department are testing new innovative ways of diagnosing cancer earlier. As regular attendees of cancer debates will know, I never tire of praising the accelerate, co-ordinate, evaluate—ACE—centres, which are the multidisciplinary diagnostic centres for patients with vague or non-specific symptoms. As the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, they are being piloted across 10 sites in the country. They offer patients a range of tests on the same day—a point that has been made by several hon. Members—with rapid access to results.

The centres are magnificent. I visited the ACE centre at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford earlier this year. I met the practitioners who work there, the commissioning group and the GPs who are involved in it. GPs are tremendously, and rightly, excited about the centres. They will make a huge step-change improvement in early diagnosis, particularly for cancers such as ovarian cancer, where symptoms can be vague and can appear less serious at first. The plan is for that innovation to address the delay that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and other hon. Members spoke about, so instead of a GP having to refer for one test and wait for the results, then refer for the next test and wait for an appointment, the ACE centres will allow for a snappy, quicker turnaround. They could be a game-changer and could unearth the magic key when it comes to ovarian cancer.

The APPG’s report says that we should roll out ACE centres nationwide, so I am delighted, as I know the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West is, that the Prime Minister recently committed to doing just that, as part of our long-term plan. I do not get excited easily, Mr Bone, as you well know, but I am excited about the ACE centres and they are potentially transformative.

I turn now to early diagnosis in primary care. Other support measures are necessary to ensure that more cancers are caught in primary care. The NICE guidelines for suspected cancer referral recommend safety netting for those people who are at higher risk of cancer but who do not meet the referral criteria. Both Cancer Research UK and Macmillan have produced additional advice and support for GPs to implement those guidelines, including the safety netting that I have just mentioned, over the last few years.

I was blown away to meet Macmillan GPs at Britain Against Cancer earlier this year. They are an excellent innovation and have an awful lot to give, but they are few in number. I am very interested in them and I talk to Macmillan about the potential use of Macmillan GPs in helping to transfer specialist knowledge of cancer to wider general practitioners. I always say of GPs that they are not dissimilar to MPs when we hold our surgeries, in that almost everyone who comes to our surgeries is more of an expert on the subject than we are, because we are general practitioners. So GPs get a hard rap, but they are general practitioners and that is the area of the profession that they have chosen to go into.

We need to support GPs better through diagnosing cancer, from our targeted lung cancer screening in the lorries in car-parks in the north-west—we trialled that approach in Manchester and it has been very successful—to the ACE centres that I have mentioned. That is all aimed at supporting the NHS, especially GPs, to identify cancer earlier.

The shadow Minister asked about the review of the referral pathway. As she knows, the implementation of the faster diagnosis standard requires trusts to review and speed up diagnosis pathways for suspected cancers. NHS England and NHS Improvement are working closely together to emphasise the key principles for ensuring that we need in this area, which include improving that the most value is derived from each appointment. The standard is being measured for a year from April 2019 to April 2020, when it comes into place. That will ensure that patients are told that they have a cancer diagnosis or an all-clear within a maximum of 28 days of being urgently referred by their GP for suspected cancer. As I always say, 28 days is not a target; it is a maximum. When someone has a cancer worry, 28 minutes can seem like a lifetime, and such things always seem to come on a Friday night, when the weekend lies ahead. Twenty-eight days is our new target, but it is certainly not what we aim for; we aim to do better than that.

We heard from several Members—including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the shadow Minister—about Be Clear on Cancer. That campaign is one of the great successes of public policy in recent years. The APPG’s report also recommends, as the hon. Lady said, running a Be Clear on Cancer campaign to raise awareness of ovarian cancer symptoms. However, she is experienced and smart enough in this area to know that Be Clear on Cancer cannot focus specifically on a cancer type, such as breast cancer; it is about clusters. That is where we have found it to be most successful.

Public Health England, for which I have ministerial responsibility, takes a number of factors into account when deciding which campaigns to develop; of course, there is healthy competition in this space and unfortunately there is always more demand than supply. One of the main criteria in deciding which campaigns to run with is the scope to save lives through early diagnosis; that measure is what I will judge that work against.

Campaigns can be effective only if the cancer has a clear early sign or symptom that the general public can act upon if it should emerge. Being honest, even blunt, that is part of the challenge here, as has already been said and for the reasons that have already been given. So the regional Be Clear on Cancer pilot for ovarian cancer took place in the north-west of England in February and March 2014—a while ago now—with this simple key message:

“Feeling bloated, most days, for three weeks or more could be a sign of ovarian cancer. Tell your doctor.”

PHE is currently undertaking new data analysis and research to determine Be Clear on Cancer campaigns for next year, which is 2019-20. At this time, no decisions have been made, and I will take the bid from today’s debate very strongly. The outcomes from the regional pilot—and a pilot that focused on a range of abdominal symptoms such as diarrhoea, bloating and discomfort, which can be indicative of a number of cancers, including...
ovarian cancer—will of course be taken strongly into consideration, and that is where I think we will head with this work.

However, let me clear that PHE and NHS England have had a very clear steer from me that I want to run the campaign on lower abdominal symptoms as soon as practicably possible. We have to make sure that the operational capability is in place across the NHS, because the worst thing that we could do is create a demand without being able to meet it. That is a rather boring, practical reality, but it is a reality. I reiterated this point to the APPG recently when we met and I will of course keep Members updated; I know they follow these matters very closely.

The hon. Member for Strangford also asked about genetic testing and its role in identifying the increased risk of ovarian cancer. One area where England is very much at the cutting edge of cancer diagnosis is in the creation of the new national genomic testing network, which will be delivered through seven new genomic laboratory hubs, as we call them. They will give patients access to state-of-the-art tests that can diagnose their disease or help to inform their treatment. So the genomic lab hubs will do three things: provide consistent and equitable access to genomic tests, which is very important, as it will ensure there is a level playing field; operate to common national standards, specifications and protocols; and deliver the single national genomic testing directory, which will cover the use of all the genomic technology, from the single gene to the whole-genome sequencing for cancer and for rare and inherited disease.

The labs are in a period of transition, to embed fully the new infrastructure and the new national genomic test directory. I hope that this transition will ensure the safe roll-out of the service without disrupting clinical care. Patients will continue to receive the testing they need to inform their clinical care, and the new national test directory will also include the BRCA testing for women with ovarian cancer in line with NICE guidance, which the hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned.

While I am talking about the hon. Gentleman, or “the hon. Member for Westminster Hall” as I like to call him, I note that he also touched on screening programmes, as did the Opposition spokesperson and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire. The UK National Screening Committee is awaiting the updated results of the UK trial of ovarian screening, which is the UK collaborative trial of ovarian cancer screening, as it is known. The secretariat is in contact with the researchers and the committee will review the findings as soon as they are published.

The hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to talk about the workforce. On page eight of its report, the APPG outlines the importance of sonographers. There will be increased emphasis on diagnosing cancers earlier, but we will not be able to find the magic key without those people who do the searching, who are our NHS workforce. So we must ensure that we have the right workforce in the right place to deliver that frontline care and meet the Prime Minister’s ambition.

Last December, Health Education England published its first ever cancer workforce plan, committing to the expansion of capacity and skills. HEE will follow that plan up with a longer term strategy that will be aligned with the NHS long-term plan, which seems sensible to me, and that will look at workforce needs beyond 2021. We have to look at a very long landscape when it comes to the NHS workforce. I will not pre-empt that plan, but I can assure hon. Members that it will set out how we will ensure that a sustainable cancer workforce are in place to deliver on the ambitions that we have set out.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire talked about the cancer dashboard. The APPG report, which of course he was involved in drafting, also recommends including ovarian cancer data within the dashboard. The dashboard was first published in May 2016 as a tool to help the cancer alliances, the commissioners and the providers in the acute trusts to quickly and easily identify the priority areas for improvement, and to enable easy tracking of progress towards our national ambitions.

PHE is working with NHS England’s cancer programme team on the next phase of the dashboard development, and that will be informed by the needs of the key stakeholders and the cancer charities, with which I hold a regular roundtable; some of those charities’ staff are here in the Gallery today. It is no secret that hon. Members know that I am frustrated about the cancer dashboard. I am impatient about most things, as my private office will sadly attest, and I am incredibly impatient about the dashboard being limited to the top four cancers. I want to see it expanded and I intend to see it expanded: NHSE and PHE have a very clear direction from me that I will be watching their work and I expect to see it producing what I and other Members in this House want.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West spoke about surgery and the mixed picture around the country. I do not want to short-change her by not giving her the detailed answer I want to provide to her good point, so I will look into it and write to her and the other Members who have been in the debate today. We obviously must diagnose early, as that gives us better and less radical treatment options, but for some surgery is a sad reality. We must ensure that the NHS is good at not only sharing best practice but implementing it, and that is as true in surgery as anywhere else.

I pay tribute to the hard work and professionalism of our dedicated cancer workforce, and to the Members who care so passionately about the subject and have brought it to the House today. Ultimately, it is our workforce who will determine the success of the cancer strategy and the long-term plan for the NHS. We can only set the direction and the ambition and ensure that the resources are in place, and I believe that I am doing that, as Minister for cancer.

I am excited by the huge potential for the next 10 years of cancer diagnosis, treatment and support. We have fully established the 19 cancer alliances. We have backed them with the funding they need to transform services, and will go on doing that, to ensure that the NHS long-term plan can be delivered on the ground through the alliances, with cancer at its heart. The plan can turbo-charge all that we have achieved through the cancer strategy. I have said before, and I will say again, that I want the alliances to be much more open and accountable and much more approachable, especially by Members of Parliament in England, who should be
able to call them to account much more than they do. I suspect that many Members here have the chief executive of their local trust on speed dial; I hazard a guess that they do not have the leader of their cancer alliance there also, and that should change.

It was interesting to get the Scottish perspective from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). We would like to see the ambition in England matched across the whole United Kingdom and we absolutely stand ready, as always, to work with Scottish Members and the Scottish Government. If there is anything we can do to help share that ambition, we will do it.

NHS England, Public Health England and I, with the tireless support of our cancer community—team cancer as I always call it—are committed to making a reality the ambitions that the Prime Minister has set out. That will ensure, as I said in this place not two weeks ago, that we continue to make huge leaps forward over the next 10 years to a future where cancer has no future.

Lee Rowley: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this exemplary debate. It has been one of those debates that we all aspire to have, in which we talk about the detail and leave out a lot of the politics, and in which there is unity regarding wanting the same outcome: we all want to be able to treat the disease more quickly, with better outcomes and fewer people experiencing it. I am grateful to everyone for entering into the discussion in that spirit.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for attending this morning, for highlighting the importance of the issue to him, and for mentioning all the work being done in Northern Ireland—particularly for raising the point about genome testing. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for sharing his experience north of the border. He, like so many others, provided some of the most important elements of the debate—examples of constituents’ own experiences. I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople: the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for also sharing her experience north of the border; and my colleague on the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who spent so much time highlighting the group’s great work. It has been a privilege to be part of that work over the past few months; the report is a great piece of work and I hope to see improvements coming out of it.

I also thank the Minister. I am a relatively new Member, but I can often tell in debates when Ministers are going through the motions and when they actually care, and today I have heard a speech that demonstrates a genuine interest. It was great to hear about the Minister’s personal connection and about how he cares about the issue, and it was interesting to hear some of the things he highlighted. “Lots to come” is the summary I think it is fair to say we can take from the speech, with regard to the ACE centres, the potential for more public health campaigns, the genome point and the screening. I was particularly glad to hear about the dashboard, which I hope, in time, will give us an opportunity to push forward and demonstrate greater transparency.

Although they are not all still in their place, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and for Upper Bann (David Simpson). I am incredibly grateful for their contributions. I also thank everyone in the Public Gallery, who has listened and provided support. I am aware that there are Members in the room to whom the matter means much but who, by convention, are not able to speak: my hon. Friend the Members for Erwewash (Maggie Throup) and you, Mr Bone. You are undertaking a different role today, as Chair, but you were so kind in supporting me when we applied to the Backbench Business Committee for the debate. I am grateful to you and my hon. Friend for your silent but heartfelt support.

This is an important area. It has affected me personally, but it is not about the personal effects; it is about ensuring that we make progress as a country in sorting out the disease and resolving the issues, reducing the number of people out there who get a diagnosis. The debate has shown that a lot has been achieved, that a lot can be done, and that there is a lot of progress we can make, and I look forward to seeing that progress in the coming years.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank all Members for the excellent debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered ovarian cancer diagnosis and treatment.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.
Leaving the EU: Port of Sheerness

11 am

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered use of the Port of Sheerness after the UK leaves the EU.

I will try to keep my remarks in order, Mr Bone, and I hope everyone else will, too. Whether or not the Government agree an acceptable post-Brexit deal with the European Union, something will have to be done to relieve pressure on the port of Dover. As my hon. Friend the Minister will know, most of the roll-on/roll-off traffic in south-east England is via the Dover-Calais route. That means that Dover handles a huge volume of business. It is one of the world’s busiest passenger ports. In 2017, some 11.7 million passengers, 2.6 million lorries, 2.2 million cars and motorcycles, and 80,000 coaches passed through Dover. In addition, Dover’s cargo terminal handles 300,000 tonnes and 9,000 containers every year, and business is increasing. As you can imagine, Mr Bone, with all that traffic heading in and out of Dover, the local roads are badly congested, even at the best of times. When there is a problem with the ferries—often caused by strike action at Calais—that congestion gets even worse and Dover becomes gridlocked.

The Dover traffic assessment project, otherwise known as the Dover TAP, holds around 1,000 lorries on the A20 just outside Dover and has been used hundreds of times recently. Thankfully, Dover TAP has been preventing a repeat of Operation Stack. I am sure my hon. Friend will recall bringing the roads in Kent to a near standstill for a month in 2015. If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, what happened to Kent’s roads in 2015 could look like a walk in the park. Indeed, unless a contingency plan is put in place to combat a no-deal scenario, the situation could become critical and have a huge impact not only on Kent’s economy, but on that of the UK as a whole.

Highways England has been looking for an alternative to Operation Stack, including closing the M26 and using it as a car park. In my opinion, such an option would not solve the problem, but simply move it from one part of Kent to another. Some days, 10,000 lorries pass through the port of Dover in a 24-hour period. If those lorries were held up, that would be equivalent to a queue more than 90 miles long. That is a lot of potential traffic congestion, and it could see whole swathes of the south-east grind to a halt, but such a scenario is avoidable. Parking up thousands of lorries does not have to happen, because there are other solutions. For instance, rather than relying on Operation Stack or similar parking arrangements that have not worked in the past, would it not be better to provide lorry drivers with alternative routes to and from the continent? The port of Sheerness offers one such alternative.

Mr Bone, you might ask, “Why Sheerness?” Well, it has a number of advantages. For a start it has a ro-ro terminal that is available for use today. It was built to service the Ola Line, which ran a ferry service from Sheerness to the Netherlands. Although that ferry service stopped running in 1994, the ro-ro terminal is still in perfect working order. The port of Sheerness has other excellent facilities and is already one of the major ports for the importation of cars into the UK. Unlike Dover, it has plenty of spare space and room to expand. Although Sheerness is further away from Calais by sea than Dover, it is closer by road to London and the midlands, so the longer sea journey from France would be counter-balanced by a shorter road journey to the lorry’s final destination. In addition, Sheerness is closer than Dover to the Netherlands, which opens up the possibility of routing more freight via the Dutch ports, such as Rotterdam.

It is worth pointing out that Sheerness is the only port in England with water as deep as that at Rotterdam, so it would make a perfect partner. Another advantage of encouraging a Rotterdam-Sheerness route is that the road journey from Germany and eastern Europe to Rotterdam is shorter than that to Calais. Once again, although the sea journey would be greater, there would be a saving on road travel at both ends. While having a longer sea journey might seem a disadvantage, in a post-Brexit world it would be an advantage, because it would give more time for the customs paperwork to be sorted out electronically at either end. That is what is happening at Felixstowe, which manages to import £86 billion of goods every year from inside and outside the EU without the need for lengthy customs checks. Such a system replicated in other ports, such as Sheerness, would ensure frictionless borders and no hold-ups.

One final advantage of using the port of Sheerness is the amount of commerce that already takes place in the area. In my constituency, I have the Morrisons regional distribution centre; the new Aldi regional distribution centre; the Kemsley paper mill, which is the second largest fibre-based paper operation in Europe; and the Sittingbourne Eurolink, which is one of the largest industrial and manufacturing estates in southern England. As you can imagine, Mr Bone, all those industries generate a lot of lorry movements, many from the continent. Routing those lorries via Sheerness would reduce pressure on Dover and makes a lot of sense logistically.

Making better use of the port of Sheerness post-Brexit would require some investment. For example, the A249 dual carriageway would have to be extended half a mile into the docks. An improved electronic customs system like that at Felixstowe would have to be installed to ensure lorries could be cleared with as little delay as possible. I appreciate that that would come at a cost to the Exchequer, but when we consider the wider impact on the country if goods are held up at either Calais or Dover and the costs involved with providing an alternative to Operation Stack, the investment would be a small price to pay for what would effectively become a safety net for Dover.

11.7 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this important debate. It highlights an issue that is topical for both his constituency and the wider economy.

Our ports are key to our economic success. They deliver 95% of our exports and imports. I hope that we can agree that first and foremost, the United Kingdom ports are exemplary. My experience visiting our ports as
Maritime Minister has reinforced my belief that our ports are the best in the world. We have the most liberalised ports sector in Europe and arguably the world. My hon. Friend will understand and ports competing to attract and facilitate trade with both the EU and the rest of the world, all on a fully commercial basis with minimal expense to the taxpayer. This responsible sector has invested vigorously throughout fluctuating conditions in world trade and the domestic economy. It has adapted to changing patterns of demand, including radical changes in the requirements for energy generation over recent years. Consequently, it is well placed to meet the challenges and opportunities that the country will welcome as we resume our position as an independent trading power.

The Government have set a highly facilitative context for private investment through the national policy statement for ports, which was designated in 2012. It sets a strong presumption in favour of socially and environmentally responsible development. The sector has long recognised its environmental stewardship duties as it often occupies sensitive sites at the land/water interface. Moreover, ports have permitted development rights that help to facilitate modest adaptation of port estates in a nimble way where that has no adverse environmental implications.

Our ports have many strengths, especially being nimble and flexible, so the ports sector as a whole stands ready to meet challenges. As the ports sector is such a competitive one, I must remain neutral in that commercial arena, so to meet challenges. As the ports sector is such a competitive and flexible, so the ports sector as a whole stands ready for private investment through the national policy statement for ports, which was designated in 2012. It sets a strong presumption in favour of socially and environmentally responsible development. The sector has long recognised its environmental stewardship duties as it often occupies sensitive sites at the land/water interface. Moreover, ports have permitted development rights that help to facilitate modest adaptation of port estates in a nimble way where that has no adverse environmental implications.

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Many other hon. Members will doubtless be quick to point out that they have equally alert and vigorous ports in their constituencies, which I know to be true as I have had the privilege of seeing several in operation at first hand.

Gordon Henderson: I want to make it clear—I thought I made it clear in my speech—that I was using Sheerness as an example only because it is in my constituency and I know a lot about it, but the case could apply to many other ports. We should point out to those who are filled with doom and gloom about what will happen post-Brexit that we have ports other than Dover. That is all I am trying to say.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. He is absolutely right. We must seize the opportunity and recognise that we have many productive and flexible ports up and down our country.

One of the reasons prompting this timely debate is the success of the port of Dover, along with the channel tunnel, which is why any sizeable proportionate reduction in their traffic would be so challenging to replace elsewhere. My hon. Friend discussed the level of traffic and freight going through the port of Dover, and he also referred to the port of Felixstowe. That remains the largest UK container port and is another example of a world-class port capable of accommodating today’s ultra-large container vessels. Its sister port, Harwich, is a versatile ro-ro facility that handles both accompanied and unaccompanied ro-ro trailers. Also, Associated British Ports has advertised the strengths of its Humber ports for unaccompanied ro-ro and is also investing in short sea container capability at Immingham. Those are just a few examples. The Government are involving the whole UK ports industry in discussions on resilience issues directly and through the UK Major Ports Group and British Ports Association. Nevertheless, the initiative of Sheerness in promoting its ro-ro facilities is a good example of an enterprising and positive transport sector.

My hon. Friend will have heard from Ministers that we are confident of securing a withdrawal deal with the European Union that is in the interests of both the UK and the EU member states as trading partners, for this is not a zero-sum game. All the participants in international trade stand to gain, and that applies as much to the UK’s ro-ro business with the EU 27 after we leave as it does to our trade with the rest of the world, so we expect an agreement and a transition period that will enable a sensible adaptation to the inevitable technical changes in border arrangements. However, as a responsible Government, we must plan for all eventualities.

There has been a great deal of speculation, especially in the past week, about the Government’s intentions in the event of a no-deal outcome. The Government have made it clear that UK border controls—those that we control—will continue to enable trade to flow as frictionlessly as possible, which is what we are working towards.

Gordon Henderson: I am sorry to interrupt again. I accept everything the Minister says, but, because the Calais-Dover route is so short, it does not lend itself to electronic trans-shipments at the moment, so we have to upgrade those facilities. My understanding is that the software used at Felixstowe could be changed to accommodate Dover. When asked how long it would take, someone said a few minutes, and we should explore such options.

Ms Ghani: Once again my hon. Friend makes a positive intervention on how our ports can continue to be flexible and take on board new technology to ensure that all the checks are made in good time, especially when we consider the very short journeys to Dover.

Certain checks and controls, including those already undertaken from time to time on EU goods, have to take place at the frontier to be effective, and that will continue to be the case. But there is much that we can and will do to expedite flow, especially where checks can be undertaken away from the physical frontier. We cannot control what controls the EU will require or what member states will do in response to those requirements in the event that we leave without a deal. We can seek to influence such things, of course, but ultimately there remains a risk that the flow of traffic will be affected.

The Dover strait, encompassing the channel tunnel, concentrates the greater part of accompanied HGV trade with the continent. It is a 24/7 operation that includes a stream of ferries departing at half-hourly intervals. Inevitably, such a dense flow of HGVs could become subject to some constriction in the event that prolonged checks feed back into the queue of arriving vessels. We would be failing in our duty to the public if we did not take such possibilities very seriously and prepare for all eventualities.

On the opportunities proposed at Sheerness, earlier this year Peel Ports issued its pamphlet, “Brexit unlocked—A Contingency Option Using Uncongested...
Lorries are parked on the M2 every night. We have to do something about that. I have been working with Kent County Council and Highways England, and I have offered sites in my constituency for lorry parks, but nothing ever happens. I hope that the Minister can encourage something to happen on that.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend again raises the important issue of lorry parks. We know we need more, but no Member would like them in their constituency. I value his contribution, and I will ensure that his passion for ensuring that we have lorry parks is passed on to the Roads Minister.

I know that the A249 is important to my hon. Friend. Road connections are vital to any ro-ro port, and indeed to most others. Our port connectivity study, published just last April, surveyed the situation in England nationally. It acknowledged that there is a good case for strengthening sections of the strategic road network and specific potential to upgrade sections of the A249 near Sheerness. The study is a platform for future investment in worthwhile improvements at a range of ports including Sheerness, but of course the port is open for business with its existing connectivity. I would welcome another meeting with my hon. Friend to try to take that forward, especially with the Roads Minister.

Gordon Henderson rose—

Ms Ghani: I see another intervention on its way.

Gordon Henderson: I am sorry to intervene yet again. The A249 and the link I mentioned into the port are important. I mentioned it to the Secretary of State a year ago, and he instructed Highways England to go down and have a look at it. The response from Highways England was that it is not necessary because it is not busy enough. Highways England does not seem to understand that we will make it busier only if we get the road link in. That is where it is sadly not always singing from the same hymn sheet as the Department for Transport.

Ms Ghani: I hope Highways England will acknowledge my hon. Friend’s intervention. Our port connectivity study made it clear that that part of the A249 requires investment to ensure that our ports continue to do what they do best, which is not only bringing freight in but moving it up and down the country.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important topic. He has rightly highlighted the potential of an important port business in his constituency, as well as of other significant businesses up and down the country. I am sure that he and I agree that it is part of a wider picture of readiness to seize commercial opportunities across the UK ports sector. I look forward to working with him in flying the flag for UK ports. I have no doubt that you will agree, Mr Bone, that the UK was a great maritime trading power for many years before we joined the European Union, and we will continue to be a great maritime nation after Brexit.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.
Beauty and the Built Environment

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered beauty and the built environment.

It is a great pleasure to speak on this subject. I am prepared to be corrected if anyone knows better, but I imagine that this is the first House of Commons debate specifically on beauty for a very long time indeed. Yet the journey through life should be the pursuit of the sublime. It should be a search for absolute truth. In it we should experience and rejoice in all the exposure to beauty that characterises each and all of our journeys.

Beauty, whether in the laughter of a child, the scent of a rose, a glorious landscape or the setting sun, makes life richer and more fulfilled. In doing so, it does not merely satisfy our aesthetic needs; it takes us closer to the understanding of truth. As Keats wrote:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all”.

What Keats meant was that absolute truth is exposed to us—explained to us, one might say—through the experience of beauty. It is very hard for human beings, who are frail, faulted and fallen, to understand that truth except through the means that I have described: those touches or experiences of something pure, special and magical.

Sadly, we live in an age that is dull and utilitarian and in which mystery and magic are extraordinarily unfashionable. It is odd that that should be, for it was not true for most of our history, and has not been so for most great civilisations. It is unusual to be as utilitarian as we are, but now it is time for a change—for a renaissance. It is time for beauty to be put back at the heart of Government policy. I am delighted that the Minister shares that view, as I know from our conversations. It is a delight to have a Housing Minister who cares about the quality of housing, and all that says about its look and feel and our sense of place, rather than simply the quantity of houses that we build. I shall say more about that in my long and fascinating speech.

The scale of the housing problem means that some may dismiss concerns about style, regarding them as indulgent or even irrelevant. “Aren’t there more important things to worry about?”, we hear people say. Indeed, the focus of housing policy has long been on targets for quantity rather than quality. We risk having a competition across the political spectrum to build the most houses possible, with despair. Frankly, that is the result of successive Governments and local authorities of all political persuasions; I cast no slur on any single party in this House.

Mr Hayes: That is a good and important point that relates to something I shall say later about taking a bottom-up approach to delivering better-quality housing, rather than imposing top-down targets. My hon. Friend is right that we need to inspire a new generation to believe that this can be done, because there are some who say that it does not matter or even that it cannot be done—that it is no longer possible to build wonderful, lovely things, and that we are no longer capable of imagining what generations before us created. I just do not believe that. I think we can and should do better, and my hon. Friend rightly describes one of the mechanisms that might achieve that.

To dismiss concerns about the quality of what we build is both wrong and, ultimately, destructive. We cannot hope to change the public perception of new development unless we fundamentally change its very nature. Beauty should be at the heart of the public discourse. It should be part of our conversation about housing and development. As the great philosopher Roger Scruton puts it,

“we are losing beauty, and there is a danger that with it we will lose the meaning of life.”

If I am right that the journey through life requires us to experience beauty to build the personal fulfilment and communal contentment necessary to make a society that works, ignoring beauty does not merely short-change future generations; ultimately, it will destroy our chance to make a nation of which we can all feel proud. There is a close relationship between the sense of place and the social solidarity necessary to build a harmonious society. I could say a lot about harmony, but that is a subject for another time or another debate and His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has spoken about it far more eloquently than I ever could, so perhaps I should defer to him.

The first misconception that I would like to quash, which sometimes prevents the debate about quality from taking place at all, is that the kind of approach that I am trying to articulate, which concentrates on beauty, is both marginal and gets in the way of getting things done. According to that view, constantly demanding more of development—I am talking about commercial as well as domestic buildings, because this is not wholly about housing—somehow acts as a barrier, an impediment, to delivering the bigger objective of building to provide a basis for growth and prosperity. I just do not believe that. Actually, I think the opposite is true.

When Her Majesty the Queen came to the throne, her reign was marked by talk of a new Elizabethan age. After the destruction caused by the war, people looked to new development with optimism. They believed that we could create a society that both looked better and was better to be part of. How curious and how sad that during Her Majesty’s reign, attitudes to development have diametrically altered. Whereas people once anticipated development with joy, they now very often look on it with despair. Frankly, that is the result of successive Governments and local authorities of all political persuasions; I cast no slur on any single party in this House.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—
Mr Hayes: And certainly not on my dear friend the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am delighted to give way.

Mr Cunningham: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman takes a difficult topic and makes it understandable—to say the least—in a very jocular way. I am sure he will remember as I do when Governments used to announce at general elections that they would build about 300,000 houses a year. That has gone by the board now.

Planning is one issue when we talk about housing, and particularly social housing, in this day and age, but, more importantly, many years ago we used to have the Parker Morris standards for social housing. That is all gone now. Even in the private sector, we very often see houses that are nothing better than boxes. They look okay on the outside, but inside they are very small indeed. I do not think people are getting value for money. There is the design, but there is also the importance of bringing local people’s views into the discussion as well, and Members will probably have heard me talk of the King’s Hill area in Coventry, which is a beauty spot with lots of history where they now want to build houses. Before I sit down, I would just add that when we had a problem in Coventry with council houses, we let residents take part in the process of the design of alterations. That went very well. We have to get back to times like that—

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Cunningham, that is a speech, not an intervention. I call Mr Hayes.

Mr Hayes: I am delighted to say that I agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman said. I think of where I was brought up in south-east London. It was a council estate built, as so many were, in that period during the war and just after. Houses were not only well built—they were attractive. Care was taken about the design of the house. There were a variety of house styles across the estate. There were houses of different sizes to accommodate different kinds of people; there were smaller properties, suitable for elderly people, and large homes suitable for families. The variety of houses, the look and feel of the development, the street layout, the presence of a widely used parade of shops, the church, the school, the community hall, and so on, were the component parts of a functioning community, of which everyone felt part. I am not sure that can be said of many developments now.

The hon. Gentleman is right that privately owned, but also rented properties, are often soulless, ubiquitous and indistinguishable from one another, looking the same from Penzance to Perth, with no sense of the vernacular, no sense of local personality and thereby, incapable of inspiring the local and particular sense of place necessary to build communal feeling. That is where we have got to. It is extraordinary that we have, given the opportunity that existed in the post-war years after the bombing of many of our cities. The redevelopment could have been not only regenerative, but inspiring. I have to say that we, as a nation, failed. Now, this Minister in his time in this job has the opportunity to put that right.

In my roles in the various offices of state, I have tried to influence the quality of development and what we build. As Energy Minister, I acted to ensure that wind turbines were constructed in appropriate locations after proper consultation with local communities, which is critical. Consideration about the impact on landscape became a vital part of the approval process. Some then simply dismissed the argument I made as irrelevant, on the basis of the easily grasped but utterly crass notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The notion that beauty is relative has been used to justify much of the ugliness imposed on our towns and cities by architects, planners and developers since the war. Such developments have succeeded only in undermining public confidence in new housing. What is often not appreciated is how the public’s perception of development has changed.

I think what I have already described would be agreed by Members across the House of Commons, and certainly beyond it, but the sad fact is that planners by and large still have not learned their lesson. Even today, for example, some still laud the idea of streets in the sky. Plans are apparently afoot to extend the misconception of elevated walkways constructed in the City of London after the war. Streets in the sky were never a substitute for real streets—for architecture on a human scale, in proportion and in harmony with its environment. As anyone who has ever attempted to walk to the Barbican Centre knows, urban walkways are alienating, confusing and a poor substitute for design that puts people first. The Barbican is far from the worst example. There were any number of large developments, mainly of social housing, with walkways and gantries that not only became havens for criminals but often isolated rather than united blocks of flats.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): This is not a whimsical issue for my right hon. Friend, but a long-standing issue of concern, as it is for me. My postgraduate thesis was on the Gothic revival in domestic architecture in the mid-18th century. That brings me to my question. How do we reconcile space for innovation, as the Gothic revival was in some respects, with respect for the vernacular in our very different counties and neighbourhoods?

Mr Hayes: As a direct result of that intervention, let me make my first demand of the Minister. I have more demands to make at the end, so I will get this one out of the way now—I see the Minister glancing at his civil servants nervously.

It is critical that every local authority has a design guide that is not only particular to its locale, but that has site-specific design appraisals for those most important regenerative opportunities. It is not enough for a local authority to rely on some county-wide or area-wide design guide or very broad general motherhood-and-apple-pie design principles. There have to be specific requirements for developers, which allow places to continue to change in a way that is in keeping with what has been done before. That is about materials, scale and sometimes eclecticism; there are particular places that look a particular way. We do not want every high street and every housing development, every town and every city to be indistinguishable one from another, but that will happen only if we are very demanding of what we expect of developers.

As you know, Ms Dorries, I have been Minister or shadow Minister for virtually everything, and I was once shadow Housing Minister. I met many big developers, big names that we could reel off if we wanted to, and
they all said to me, “John, if you are clear about the requirements, we will build our business plans to meet them. We understand that you want to build lovelier places, and we know that that is what people want anyway. We are quite happy to build things that people will like and want to buy, or places they will want to rent. Be very clear about your requirements and we will work to them.” It is not about taking on developers; it is about working with them, but being demanding of them.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One of the things I learned in local government when I was leader in Coventry was that if someone is clear about what they want to do, they do not get any major problems—that happens when they are vague and unclear. I was reading an article in one of today’s papers, which showed a link between crime among young people and the design of buildings, particularly social housing, and certainly in areas in London, for example. Has the right hon. Gentleman read that report? It is worth looking at.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman knows of my extremely strong views on social justice and the redistribution of advantage in society. If we are going to redistribute advantage, as I think we should, it is not good enough to suggest that people who are less well-off, people who need to rent a home or young people who are looking to make their first home could make do with something inadequate, while those who are advantaged and privileged can buy the kind of lifestyle that was available to my working-class parents. The lifestyle I enjoy in my constituency in Lincolnshire is a bit like the lifestyle I enjoyed when I was a little boy on that council estate. We still use local shops, we have a garden to play in, we have a nice home and we have what might be called a traditional way of life because I am in a position to be able to provide that for my children—going to the village school and all the rest of it—but if I went back to places such as the place where I was brought up, by and large that life would not be available to most people who are rather like my mum and dad were that short time ago. I emphasise that it was a short time ago, Ms Dorries, but you knew that anyway. I want beauty for all, not for some or for the privileged or rich alone.

John Howell: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I happily give way to my hon. Friend, who is just as committed to social justice as I am.

John Howell: My right hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with his time. One point that I would bring out strongly is something that he has mentioned in passing but has not concentrated on: the need to include the environment in housebuilding, to be able to enjoy the space that comes with that, and to be able to provide opportunity for the family.

Mr Hayes: It will be alarming to some, but a delight to others, to know that I am only on page 3 of my very long speech, and I want to make a bit of progress. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that part of the sense of place, to which I referred earlier, is about green space. I will come in a moment to some of the research done by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales’s organisations on what people want, because a lot of the interventions have mentioned the role of consultation, engagement and involvement in shaping policy around what people actually want. There has been a lot of work done on this by a variety of organisations, to which I want to refer.

Let us be clear about what we aim to achieve. We aim to build homes of which people can be proud. Le Corbusier, who is responsible for many bad things, said: “A home is a machine for living”.

A home is not a machine for living. Homes are a reflection of our humanity. William Morris said:

“Have nothing in your home that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.”

That was because Morris understood that beauty and wellbeing are inextricably linked, and that a politics that is serious about welfare and wellbeing must be serious about beauty. It is not possible to believe in the common good as passionately as all those here in the Chamber do but not care about aesthetics—the two are inseparable.

That beauty is somehow detached from matters of fairness and social justice is the second misconception that must be challenged. For the ancient Greeks, aesthetic and moral judgements were inseparable. In the 19th century, many artists considered beauty to be the vital link between freedom and truth. I sense that today there is once again a growing understanding of how aesthetics are a vital part of our judgment of value and worth. That is partly intuitive; people instinctively understand the connection between the value of beauty and a wider conception of worth.

This can be seen in protests at the ugly buildings that developers still attempt to foist on communities against their will. It can be seen in the despair at identikit supermarkets that lack any sense of craft or character, built with no consideration of the past and no regard for the future. Indeed, at the heart of modern architecture, like all modern art, is the Nietzschean idea that the past is irrelevant and we can create our own value system. Much modern architecture, like modern music, fails precisely because it rejects those principles of harmony that time has taught us to delight in, and that excite our senses not because they are discordant, but because they are harmonious.

Where modern design does succeed, that is largely by accident or because, where form has at least followed function, a building has a high degree of utility. That is important, because we often hear architects, planners and engineers speak about ergonomics, but they frequently confuse ergonomics with aesthetics. It is not sufficient for a building to be ergonomically sound, irrespective of its aesthetic.

Just occasionally, a combination occurs that unites those two things—the extension to King’s Cross is a very good example. Looking at the extension to King’s Cross and the engineering of the roof, it is clear that what is a functional requirement has been turned into a work of art, as aesthetics and ergonomics have come together. That is such an exception that it is frequently mentioned, because people are searching for an example of something joyful. Every time I go to King’s Cross station, which I do frequently on my journey to and from Lincolnshire, I look in wonder at that development. I know that we should be doing that time and again in towns and cities across the county—if not in scale, certainly in essence.
These lessons are not new, and I offer nothing that is not the wisdom of the people. The buildings that are most often treasured and valued by the public at large—our constituents—are usually older buildings that are shaped by vernacular style, where architects have taken care to be in harmony with the surroundings and where craftsmen have laboured over detail. A study by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment found that, when asked to name the most beautiful buildings in Sheffield, most respondents cited the two cathedrals.

Even the very same architects, planners and technocrats who foist ugliness on the rest of us often choose to live in beautiful, old houses in communities that still have a sense of place and a link to their surroundings. In fact, it is quite alarming that most modernists choose to live in Georgian or Victorian houses. That is the problem: escaping to gated lives, they leave well alone those who are forced to live in the kind of houses that the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) mentioned, and that is just not acceptable. Beautiful housing has become increasingly unaffordable to the kind of people he mentioned, precisely because it has become so scarce. We have seemingly become incapable of building anything of comparable quality or of planning new developments with a similar sense of place and community, which are values that matter directly to our quality of life, our sense of wellbeing and our health and happiness.

It cannot be fair that beauty is increasingly the preserve of the few, which brings me to the third misconception that cannot be left unchallenged: that beauty belongs to the past. It is often considered, sometimes unthinkingly, that it is no longer possible to build beautiful buildings. We have somehow, rather depressingly, come to believe that the supply of beauty is both finite and exhausted, perhaps because people assume that it must be dated, kitsch or whimsical to build according to the principles of classical architecture, or to extend such a vision across a development so that it is harmonious, with a sense of community and place.

Such snide comments are sometimes made about the Prince of Wales’s vision for Poundbury, although the popularity of that place reminds me of what one wit said about the original Broadway production of “The Sound of Music”: “no one liked it, apart from the public”. The truth is that, when surveyed, the public repeatedly identify those kinds of place as places where they would like to live and that they aspire to own one day.

Beauty does not have to come at too high a price and it does not have to be sacrificed for the sake of utility. Those assumptions are false. When the city fathers of Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester built great town halls in classical or gothic style, they did so because they understood that these styles had endured. A fine example is Nottingham, a city I know very well, having lived there for 20 years, studied there and been a county councillor in Nottinghamshire. The Council House in the centre of Nottingham, which is a great neo-classical building, was built in 1929. Right up until then, we understood, but the problem has grown in scale and depth since the war. Those planners, engineers and architects built something that they wanted to last, and they succeeded. The modernist library in Birmingham’s Chamberlain Square was recently demolished, just 40 years after it was built, but no one would seriously consider doing the same to the classical town hall or the other great public buildings of the Victorian era.

Despite their appearance, those buildings are, in other respects, modern: they were built using modern construction techniques. In historical terms, compared with the cathedrals I mentioned, they were built yesterday. Many were built in the late 19th or early 20th century. There are no good reasons that we cannot continue to build beautiful buildings, as the Prince of Wales has demonstrated to such wonderful effect.

While I am dealing with the Prince of Wales, I want to return to the issue of what the public want. The Prince’s organisations consulted widely on the principal things that people want and do not want. I will highlight four. They do not want their town or village to lose a strong sense of identity; they do not want green space to be unduly threatened by urban sprawl; they do not want too many tall or large buildings, out of scale with what is there already, to be built; and they do not want change to be too rapid or overwhelming. In other words, people want building development on a human scale that is incremental and in tune with the existing built environment. Is that really too much to ask of our generation? I think not, and I hope the Minister agrees.

The irony is that many modern and postmodern buildings are more expensive than buildings built and designed according to classical principles. Even in cases where improving design and build quality comes at a price, in the longer term that will save money, and not just on maintenance. A British Land study estimates that better design could save the UK economy an estimated £15.3 billion by 2050, making us all happier and healthier.

Good design has the power to strengthen communities and improve physical and mental health through abundant green space and walkable streets. It has the power to improve safety and security through the abolition of semi-private spaces, walkways and underpasses, which trap people and encourage criminality. All those considerations should be fundamental to planning policy.

It would be a genuine tragedy if concerns about the supply of housing led us to revisit the failed post-war experiment in high-rise living. That is not the answer. Tower blocks are actually built at lower densities than terraced housing. We must consign such misconceptions to the past, and in their place develop a planning system that has true regard for people and communities. For almost 60 years, our planning system has encouraged or allowed out-of-scale buildings. We need fundamental change.

I will say one other thing about His Royal Highness, who put this issue in such clear terms and speaks, I think, for the people when he said that he did not want the place “which I love greatly disappear under a welter of ugliness”.

How many communities and individuals have felt that? How many have felt that their voice is not heard by architects, planners, engineers and—I have to say it—politicians of all persuasions?

We need fundamental change. In the future, buildings should be in harmony with the landscape, vernacular in style and built from local materials, and they should offer local distinctiveness, which is the foundation of people’s sense of place. Pride in communities is unlikely to flourish if people have no say in how housing is built or how their neighbourhood develops.
As the hon. Member for Coventry South and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, that obliges us to engage and involve local people in the character, shape and scale of developments close to them. Although the revised national planning policy framework now encourages local authorities to produce design codes and styles, we must go much further.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Just to make the right hon. Gentleman aware, there are three Front-Benchers to speak, and other Members have requested to speak.

Mr Hayes: That is most kind of you, Ms Dorries. I always regard your advice seriously, and I will move reasonably swiftly to my exciting peroration so others can contribute.

Policy Exchange found that most people do not want to live in glass-covered high-rises or sprawling concrete estates. They want homes that are built in traditional styles, such as Georgian and Victorian-style terraced housing, and tree-lined streets. Similarly, research by Create Streets found that, in overall planning, people value green spaces; walkability, both in terms of consecutiveness and street-level interest; and a minimisation of the internal semi-private space that is a function of tower blocks, walkways and so on.

The success of the “Save our parks” campaign run by The Mail on Sunday is indicative of how much we value green space, yet parks and open spaces across the country are being lost, eaten up by greedy developers and unprotected by careless councils. We should not just protect green spaces, but build new parks and squares. I was pleased by the Budget yesterday, but we need to do more. Why does the Minister not stand up and say that it is his plan, ambition and intention to create 100 new parks and green spaces in towns and cities across the country?

In practice, much greenfield development is degenerative. All development should be regenerative where possible. It should be not a bolt-on to communities, but an opportunity to enhance and develop them in a way about which we can all feel proud. Policy Exchange estimated that, in London alone, there are 6,122 hectares of brownfield land, the mixed use of which could accommodate between 250,000 and 300,000 new homes. Bad design must no longer be tolerated. I want beauty for all.

I am coming to my exciting peroration, Ms Dorries, so excitement can build from now on—just in case anyone wanted notice of the need to be excited. We plant trees for those born later—our children and grandchildren—and we should build for future generations, too. The built environment we leave behind is our children’s inheritance. We must not leave them a poisoned legacy of lost beauty and present ugliness. Such a legacy has already led to the burgeoning interest in local history. Bookshops are filled with illustrated history books, invariably with the word “lost” in their title. Towns and cities, pictured as they once were and no longer are, fascinate our constituents, because once we knew how to build and develop. They show a lost world of proud local shopkeepers, well-kept shopping arcades, community and Victorian civic pride. How much more can we afford to lose before we end this destruction? When will we start adding to our stock of beauty once more? Beauty once lost must now be regained. The Government can play their part. We must demand and do more. We must deliver beauty in our time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. The Front Benchers are going to have 10 minutes each. Two other Members wish to speak, so to be fair and equitable they have just over 10 minutes each.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) on securing it and, as ever, for speaking so eloquently and poetically. I would never be able to emulate his use of the English language and his flow, but others might be able to—I suspect that the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) will do so.

The focus of this debate is the national planning policy framework, which provides a framework for producing local plans for housing and other developments. Those plans, in turn, are the background against which applications for planning permission are decided. I appreciate that the NPPF applies only in England, but it is important to have well-designed and visually attractive developments across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am sure most, if not all, hon. Members will have heard me talk about my beautiful constituency of Strangford, which I have the honour and privilege of representing, and working and living in. I genuinely believe it is the best place to be in all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Other hon. Members will say, “I expect the hon. Member for Strangford to say that,” but I honestly believe it. I urge those who have not been there to make that journey. When they see the beauty that we have, they will undoubtedly have the same opinion as me. We have large towns, small towns and lots of small villages, but for the most part we are a rural constituency with rolling green hills, a glistening lough, beautiful walks, canoe trails, and much more, all under the protective gaze of Scrabo Tower as it looks down from the edge of Newtownards down to Strangford Lough and across the constituency of Strangford.

Those of us who represent rural constituencies know how important it is to balance the need for development with the need to maintain natural beauty, ensuring that buildings are in keeping with the local area. In 1943, having seen a burnt and crumbling House of Commons, Winston Churchill remarked:

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”—[Official Report, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 403.]

That is spot on. As a boy, one of my childhood heroes was Winston Churchill, as was Blair Mayne and a former Member of this House, Dr Ian Paisley. To receive planning permission to build in the countryside in Northern Ireland, one of the requirements is to “promote high standards in the design, siting and landscaping of development”.

It is no longer enough for buildings to be structurally sound and to simply do the job. It has to be more than that. They must also be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, whether they are in the countryside or an urban area.
While we battle to maintain our green spaces, we also recognise the demands for more housing and the infrastructure to support it and keep villages and towns connected. In Northern Ireland, the regional development strategy—RDS 2035—sets out eight aims, two of which are:

“Promote development which improves the health and well-being of Communities”—

and—

“Protect and enhance the environment for its own sake”.

According to neuroscientists, buildings and cities can affect our mood and well-being—I believe they do—and specialised cells in the hippocampal region of our brains are attuned to the geometry and arrangement of the spaces we inhabit. For example, evidence shows that people’s happiness levels can be more easily achieved by living in an aesthetically beautiful city or a beautiful location in the countryside. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on healthy homes and buildings.

Last week we launched a white paper in which we outline the need for modern homes to be energy-efficient, and to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye inside and out. Last week the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on those issues and how we can make housing more accessible to people right across the United Kingdom.

**John Howell:** The hon. Gentleman talks about the need to provide infrastructure along with housing, but environmental infrastructure is the big thing that is mostly missing in the development of new housing estates.

**Jim Shannon:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is right. That is why we make sure that the environmental impact is a big part of development approval in Northern Ireland. He is clearly right and that should be at the centre of any development on the mainland as well.

Studies have shown that growing up in a city doubles the chances of someone developing schizophrenia and increases the risk for other mental disorders such as depression and chronic anxiety. Despite a higher concentration of people, much of that stems from a lack of social cohesion or meaningful neighbourly interaction. It could be one of the reasons that access to green spaces, where people can gather and escape, is so important for people living in cities. The correct environment around someone helps emotional and mental well-being.

Although we face potentially different issues in rural areas, the need to ensure that developments are in keeping with the area and, if possible, enhance it rather than detract from it is vital. The greatest problem in rural areas is the increasing need and demand for developments, and, as a result, improved infrastructure in terms of roads and transport. Of course, rural development always poses difficulty, especially in areas that have either seen an influx of new buildings or in more remote areas that are almost untouched by architecture or by any development at all. In both cases—I can speak with some authority on this because it is something that many constituents have come to speak to me about—the fear is that something is being lost, and that natural beauty and natural habitats are being replaced by concrete and stone. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that rarely sits easily with residents.

We are also, arguably, more aware than we ever have been before of the impact that we are having on the world: our carbon footprint and the increase in pollution and waste. That is an issue for us every day in this House and outside. Those are fairly new considerations that architects now must deliver as well as ensuring that buildings are safe and structurally sound, along with providing an element of beauty for the local area. The Government have set some money aside within the health budget to address mental health issues. I read the other day that among students and young pupils in school there has been a 50% increase in mental and emotional issues. In Northern Ireland we have 10,000 children who have such issues. It is good that the Government have set that money aside. We need to have departmental co-operation and interaction to ensure that what we deliver in terms of houses also helps to reduce the mental and emotional issues.

In rural areas we must ensure that the requirement to bring something to the local area and to enhance it—at the same time as complementing the local environment—is always met. In urban areas more needs to be done to ensure that, where possible, residents have access to green open spaces and that architecture can respond to the demand for something different and interesting, particularly as simple and monotonous architecture has already been shown to have a more negative impact on citizens. When something as simple as our surroundings can have such an impact on our daily lives and therefore on our mental health, it is important that measures to improve the aesthetics of new and existing buildings should be considered.

Again, I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings on securing this debate and I look forward to other contributions.
beauty. It is ironic that many of the buildings and much of the architecture that my right hon. Friend praised were built when planning laws were much more relaxed. When we walk through the marshland that surrounds the City of London we walk through an entirely unplanned city, which would have been planned after the great fire of London had not the merchants revolted against Christopher Wren's masterplan, but we cherish such beauty.

Modern planning is a system to try to regulate beauty. As a new Back Bencher and then later as Minister for Culture, I labored hard for the terminology of beauty to be put into our national planning framework. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) was Housing Minister, he came up to me in the Lobby after the 2010 election and thanked me for being a pain over our years in opposition when I was lobbying him to put design principles in the national planning policy framework, and he thanked me for helping him to understand its importance.

Nevertheless, we have not covered ourselves in glory since. I, for one, hold my hand up as having been at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport when we downgraded and merged the role of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment—I think it was subsumed into the Design Council. I should be interested to hear from the Minister what engagement he has with what is left of it.

I do not say that CABE was a perfect model, but to have just one organisation out there holding planners and, more importantly, developers to account for design principles was important. In fact, someone from CABE, when it was still alive, kindly took me around a development in my constituency and pointed out where the developers had put in money and effort, and where that had petered out, resulting in the creation of buildings that were not, of course, unliveable, but were certainly not designed in a way to create harmonious surroundings. It was not really a question of money; it was a question of laziness.

What my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings said about how easily things could change is true. I remember bringing the architect Terry Farrell to my constituency. I am not going to defend his buildings, but as an urban planner he is quite impressive. He sat down with residents of Wallingford, a medieval town in my constituency, pointed to the thousand-year history of settlement around it—towns and villages that developed around what had been marshland—and talked about how it might be developed sympathetically and harmoniously. The residents were supportive. I do not say that if his master plan had come to fruition and the houses had been build they would not still have manned the barricades, but just to be engaged and have someone acknowledge the history of their beautiful town was enough.

I should like to hear from the Minister not only about the incorporation of design in planning principles, but about a slightly more mundane although still important issue—the quality of new buildings. Linden Homes, probably the worst developer in my constituency—the bar is pretty high—is building houses in Chelsey that are literally falling down. I have had to go and visit constituents. Miller Homes in Drayton and Kier in Shrivenham have also had some problems with their buildings. The quality of building is shockingly bad. The great irony is that the building trade has not yet been disrupted by technology. Despite the terrible connotations, we should be building prefabricated homes. The Germans have done so for years. We could build quality homes in factories and erect them at lower cost, and with higher design quality, than the terrible homes being built by Linden Homes at the moment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings mentioned the work that Policy Exchange is doing, which I applaud. A remarkable meeting is happening at lunchtime on Thursday, when a Syrian architect called Marwa al-Sabouni will be interviewed by Sir Roger Scruton. In the middle of the bombardment of Homs, that lady emailed him to ask him a question about his book on aesthetics. His talk is about the role of architecture in the Syrian civil war, which sounds completely out there, until one hears her quotation about the “lack of beauty” in Homs and “the promise of a good life that architecture can inspire.” She said:

“The old city of Homs used to be known as ‘the mother of the poor’. You didn’t need money to live there. It was a place of trees, and jasmine and fruit.”

That phrase could almost have been written by my right hon. Friend. She continued:

“But then the new city, with its corruption and its modern blocks, developed over it, bringing with it a lack of hope, despair.”

She is someone who, in the midst of an incredible conflict, with her family at risk and her friends being killed, was able to take time out to appreciate the importance of beauty.

Everything I shall say after that will seem mundane, but I certainly want design and beauty to be incorporated into planning principles. Policy Exchange has called for places of special residential character. The idea was put to me by the Duke of Richmond, about Chichester, for example. Could a heritage listing be given to some of our great cities and towns, to preserve them?

Will the Minister update us on whether what I read in the newspaper last week is true—that the wonderful, protected views of St Paul’s in London are now under threat from developers? That really would be a case of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. Those wonderful views keep London as the green, liveable city it remains, despite its being one of the world’s most globally successful cities. Everywhere we look in public policy, design and beauty are vital. How pleasing it was, even given the delays with Crossrail, that design and beauty were thought about in the design of stations. How pleasing it is that design is being made central to the character of High Speed 2; I hope it will get built. To echo, again, what my right hon. Friend said so eloquently, within the design of HS2 people in Birmingham want to build a station that is a homage to the great stations of the 19th century—a place of arrival, great welcome and beauty.

I want finally to give a small nod to my old beat of the arts, and mention the White Paper that I managed to publish before I got fired. It put place making at the heart of cultural policy—the opportunity to work with the arts to help to create and support places of great beauty.

3.25 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for bringing
this important debate to the Chamber. I reacted to some of the points he made with great empathy and understanding, and I appreciate his approach.

When I first looked at the Order Paper, and thought about the legislation and the planning frameworks that underpin these matters, it seemed on the face of it that this would be a very English debate, because the frameworks in Scotland are different. However, the speeches have been very full in their coverage, and we have had an exciting view of what the future might bring if we can get the frameworks right.

My constituency contains one of the largest housing developments in western Europe—the Dunfermline eastern expansion—and perhaps that fact allows me to contribute to the debate on design and beauty, which are applicable in all constituencies and communities, irrespective of the planning guidelines that are used. The eastern expansion has brought about what seems like never-ending growth to our mid-sized Scottish town, which has grown by easily a third in the past 10 to 15 years. The homes can be regarded as fairly similar in their design, reminding me of the song about houses that are “all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same”.

However, while there are some good examples of design and layout within that massive development, quite a lot of opportunities have probably been missed. If all the houses were triple glazed, with higher standards of insulation, and had solar panels or different kinds of renewable power built in as standard, that would give an environmental boost to the way we look at homes. The fact that people now need to retrofit some of that new technology is a backward step. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the guidelines on how to make homes more environmentally friendly in future. Some of the things I have mentioned are not visually appealing, but when we put less pollution into the environment that is surely a benefit for all citizens. It improves the environment we live in, especially when such things as air quality are so far up the environmental agenda.

Scotland starts with quite an advantage, in terms of general layout. Urban Scotland is more green than grey, and green space covers more than half of urban land in Scotland; I think 54% of urban land there is deemed green space. That translates into the equivalent of a tennis court-sized piece of publicly-accessible green space for every person, which is quite a high bar to have set and to maintain. This is not just a matter of the new homes such as those in the eastern expansion. We can surely get big wins, if we have imagination, by bringing empty houses and derelict land back into positive use, especially if that breathes life into town centres.

A great example in my constituency is the rebuild of an old linen mill that lay empty and unloved for the best part of 10 years. It is now being restored and rebuilt to create 200 new flats, but without losing all the outward appearance of the old mill building. That new life will bring vitality to our town centre, not to mention new homes for people to rent or buy.

The Scottish Government fund the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, in conjunction with Shelter Scotland, to help councils to work with owners of empty homes to bring them back into use. Some 700 homes have been brought back into the market this year alone, and Scottish local authorities can remove council tax discounts on empty homes. They can even increase council tax on those homes, so that there is an incentive for homeowners to refurbish, re-let or sell their properties, and perhaps allow an uncared-for home, or an eyesore in a town or village, to come back into use. That initiative is supported by the £4 million Scottish empty homes loan fund, which supports 17 housing projects and is targeting 500 homes across the country.

The old linen mill I mentioned is a short walk from the new Dunfermline galleries and library—a development that was crowned “Scotland's best building” in 2017. It has already won numerous design awards and is likely to be shortlisted for many more. The architects have managed to integrate the older Carnegie library, which was built last century, with a new glass and stone structure that has an open aspect across to the 10th-century Dunfermline Abbey and views across the Firth of Forth. Taking in that view, we can see Dunfermline High School, which opened a few years ago. I am particularly proud of that development, because in a previous life I was one of those councillors who Members mentioned in thinking about how we can encourage councillors and people who make local decisions to be more open to the visual aspects of our buildings.

I was chair of the council’s local education committee when Dunfermline High School was built, and I remember the endless meetings, care and attention that went into the design and functionality of that new school. In the end, we got a school that is light, airy and fit for purpose. Many Members have highlighted the psychological effects of good planning and design, and how that can affect our mental state and general outlook. Educational attainment figures for Dunfermline High School have risen on the back of that new building, and such examples highlight why good investment in public design and smart, aesthetically pleasing architecture raise both spirits and performance, and give us all a feel-good factor.

This has been a bit of a constituency tour—I am sure other Members have examples of great buildings in their constituencies—and I have saved the best to last. The Queensferry Crossing opened last year, on time and under budget; I am sure the Minister would be interested in having budgets like that all the time. It is a superb structure of immense architectural beauty, and it is framed against the backdrop of the Forth road bridge, and the iconic UNESCO-recognised Forth rail bridge. Those bridges were built in different centuries—if Members are interested, they can look on my Twitter feed, @DougChapmanSNP, because I managed to take a picture of all three bridges during my flight on Monday morning. If people want to see those views, they should do so. That might raise their spirits for the rest of the afternoon.

This has been an extremely valuable debate, especially in Budget week. Usually, anyone in charge of spreadsheets knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, but this debate has shown that many Members do know the value of our built environment, albeit it sometimes comes at a price. If we can better train our councillors and planning authorities to value design and beauty, and if we give them the planning frameworks and legislative tools, such as the Scottish Government’s Creating Places policy, we can start to put those factors at the
heart of the communities we are trying to build or rebuild. If we can do that, today’s debate will have been very worthwhile, and I look forward to the Minister’s comments.

3.35 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms Dorries, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) not only on having the most beautiful name for his constituency, but on securing this important debate on beauty. I will return to his comments in a moment, but first I wish to thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his remarks. I think he introduced a very important aspect of this debate, which is the link between beauty, a healthy environment and people’s health, including their mental health. He also reminded everyone how wonderful and beautiful Strangford is. After everyone has been to visit Durham, I encourage them to go and visit Strangford—I hope he is happy with that.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings made an amazing speech. I will not be able to match his eloquence in any way, but I hope I can offer him a service by endorsing his comments, which were long overdue. I hope that this debate starts a different discussion in this place about what planning can and should deliver.

The right hon. Gentleman raised an incredibly important topic that I learned about early on as a young academic in Belfast. One of the first projects on which I was included in the research team evaluated the impact of Divis flats on the health of the local community. Some Members might not know this, but the Divis flats were completed in 1966, as were a lot of deck-access blocks in this country. There were 12 eight-storey deck-access blocks, with one 20-storey block at the edge. I carried out my research in the 1980s, but people had maintained for many years that those blocks of flats adversely impacted on their health and wellbeing.

During the study we discovered huge amounts of asbestos that ultimately led to the blocks being demolished, which is what the local community wanted. People were propelled into campaigning, however, by the fact that they simply felt that they were not living in a good environment. They had to walk a long way along deck-access corridors that frequently had no lights, and they could not easily access transport. All the space was common space—there was very little external space. I do not know whether what replaced the Divis flats would pass the test set by the right hon. Gentleman, but it is interesting to note that those flats were replaced by streets of houses with lots of garden space and public areas of green space. The streets are near the city centre, and there is access to employment. People got better access to bus routes, and the community went from having a great many problems to being self-sustaining. I learned early on that the scale and quality of a development is very important to our sense of wellbeing.

This is not a new topic; it is a lesson we have learned before and we appear to have to learn it again. Raymond Unwin, whom I think we all accept as the father of town planning, said in 1909 that we needed to make a real case for the importance of attaching beauty and art to town planning policy. Somewhere along the way, we lost that attachment, and that needs to be addressed. ResPublica found that English people believe beauty to be a right rather than a luxury, and 81% of those polled believed that everyone should be able regularly to experience beauty, whether in the natural environment or through other methods, including those that planning can deliver for local areas.

Through the debate, the right hon. Gentleman has encouraged us all to focus on what the fundamentals of planning should be and how planners working with local communities—I will say more about that in a moment—can deliver a vision for what an area needs. Tools are also needed so that that vision can be realised in a way that local people are happy with, which means that planning has to move from using the very technocratic methods that it employs at the moment to doing something more visionary and inclusive.

As we are in the middle of a housing crisis and know that we need to deliver many more homes every year, much of our discussion in this place concentrates on the need to improve housing delivery. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman can usher in a new discussion about place making, because although it is important that we have the homes that we need, those homes sit in communities. All too often we do not pay attention to the other things that communities need to thrive: proper infrastructure, access to public services and access to employment.

We do not talk enough about good-quality design, or about how to not only save green spaces, but make them. The Minister could consider incentivising taking brownfield land in cities back to being green space, because there is often no land that has not been built on to be made into such a space. I also hope that he will consider how to give the national planning policy framework more teeth. It is okay to exhort people to have better design and have discussions in this place about it, but unless we get some regulation in the system and create the level playing field for developers that the right hon. Gentleman talked about, we are never going to raise the quality of new building. In particular, local people need to be involved at an early stage, so they can talk about the type of development that they want and make the historical and modern references that they would be willing and able to make if they were supported through the planning system.

The Minister also needs to look at permitted developments. Yesterday, I was horrified to hear the Chancellor say that there might be more. Permitted development is leading to some of the poorest housing we have had in this country for a long time—barely a third of it meets basic standards. We need proper planning in place to deliver the quality homes that we need, but permitted development does not provide that, and having more of it on our high streets could be a problem. Of course, we want change of use and a flexible planning system—it has to reflect changing needs—but permitted development ushers in poor quality, and I hope that the Minister will reject it and look instead at developing a new planning system that is much more community focused. That system could have regional or national planning tiers and focus on what our neighbourhoods need and what people say they need to thrive as communities. I know that the Minister is quite new to his job, but I look forward to hearing his response.
3.44 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Dorries. You and I were both brought up in a city punctuated by architectural superlatives, but also scarred by some of the worst examples of architectural vandalism over the last three or four decades, so this debate is of interest to us both. I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) on his fantastic speech. It will sit in his canon, alongside his groundbreaking and remarkable speech, “The journey to beauty”, which I have read several times now. He gave it as Transport Minister and it caused quite a stir in the industry at the time. He is without doubt an aesthete and a patriot, and I salute his indefatigability in the face of the ugliness that he rightly calls out. I am tempted to say “I agree” and sit down. He knows however that the issue of beauty in the built environment is close to my heart, so I shall continue.

One of the advantages of having a poet on your speechwriting team in the Department is that they quite often recall to us some of the poetry of our youth. In preparing for this speech, we considered Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb”—a wonderful poem—which reminds us, with his image of the earl and countess captured in stone, that the things we build today could last for centuries, and that we have a duty to future generations to ornament their lives as ours have been ornamented by the generations that preceded us.

When the Prime Minister asked me to take this job, she was clear about my task: she wanted more, better, and faster homes. Those are the three indelible words by which I live. We are talking in particular today about the “better” bit; building more beautifully, because in the words of the architect Frank Lloyd-Wright:

“If you foolishly ignore beauty, you will soon find yourself without it.”

Back in 2010, just 134,000 net additional homes were added to the country’s housing stock, but today, the Government are in delivery mode. The number of additional homes is up 55% to 217,000 per annum, and we are well on our way to reaching our target of 300,000 per year. Homes England, our new and more assertive national housing agency—I launched its strategic plan this morning with an exhortation to beauty in all that it does—is promoting design quality through its programmes. In July, our revised national planning policy framework put another stake in the ground. It states that “permission should be refused for poor design” especially when it “fails to take opportunities to improve the character and quality of an area.”

In decades to come, we want to look back on this golden age of housebuilding not through the windscreen of a bulldozer, but with a view to treasure, preserve and invest in what lies before us.

We must learn the lessons of the 1960s and 1970s. My right hon. Friend referred to the Birmingham central library, which has now been demolished. The same is true of Robin Hood Gardens, as well as Pimlico school—a brutalist concrete school in a ward where I served as a councillor—which I played a part in having demolished. They are temporary buildings.

Mr John Hayes: While the Minister still has 10 minutes left, let me ask him if he will agree to three things: first, to draw up a blacklist of blight, which would allow us to demolish many more buildings of that kind; secondly, to put in place obligatory local design guides so that local authorities have to build in a style that is suitable and appropriate; and, thirdly, to back the Mail on Sunday campaign to protect urban green spaces. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) spoke about level playing fields, but any playing field will do. Playing fields are places where people dance, play, meet friends and enjoy the open space. We need to protect them. Will my hon. Friend do those three things?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend raises some interesting issues. As he knows, I am in the process of producing the guidance to the NPPF, and I shall certainly take his advice as I do so. He might be interested to know that when I was at City Hall, I suggested a competition for Londoners to vote each year for a building that should be demolished, and that we should provide grant support to assist in the demolition of that building, if required. However, let us see where we get to with the guidance.

My right hon. Friend mentioned local materials and the vernacular, and we want to draw from the history of any area the use of materials that mature and age gracefully. Critically, we want to build the conservation towns and villages of the future. That is a challenge I have put to the housing development community in a number of forums over the past three or four months that I have been in this job. That does not mean that all new homes and public buildings need to be a replica of the local style, but they do need to fit in, in the broadest sense of the term.

We are therefore supporting high-quality, high-density housing such as mansion blocks, mews houses and terraced streets, typical of the English urban townscape and rural context with which we are all familiar. In
particular, I am keen to see the re-emergence of that great British gift to the world of architecture, the garden square. It is possible for modern, efficient and technology-driven design to echo our history and to reflect the local area without becoming pastiche. That is something we have sought to achieve with our garden communities programme.

More than a century ago, Sir Ebenezer Howard first outlined his idea of a garden city. He had a vision of places where people could work, raise families, travel easily and enjoy green spaces. We are renewing that idea for the 21st century, and we have set out clear expectations for high-quality place making across our country. That is a chance to aspire beyond identikit housing, which my right hon. Friend identified, and town centres that look like everywhere and nowhere. We are championing ambitious councils, which see garden communities as a central part of their plans for housing and growth. Our programme supports 23 places to deliver more than 200,000 new homes by the middle of the century. I hope that we might be able to rise to his challenge to produce 100 new parks, if each of those places has four.

We are not only building homes; we recognise that we are building neighbourhoods. Developments of 500 units or more are bigger than most villages, so we have to think in terms of neighbourhoods that function, as my right hon. Friend pointed out. To achieve that, however, we know that local planning authorities need design capacity, so we have directed almost £5 million to 26 local authorities through our planning delivery fund, to support them in developing innovative ways to increase design skills throughout the country.

We are also running workshops for councillors, to help them to understand and to support their role in ensuring beauty in the built environment. The workshops will offer them the opportunity to discuss the challenges that they face and, importantly, to share their own experience of promoting design quality. We are bringing in people from across the sector—from local authorities to developers, housing associations and architects—to share their ideas about beauty and great design.

Mr John Hayes: Will the Minister— we are lucky to have him, by the way, and the shadow Minister—agree to meet me and the Prince of Wales’s organisations to discuss how to learn from the work he has done and is now doing?

Kit Malthouse: I am more than happy to meet. In the past, I have worked closely with the Prince’s Foundation for Building Community—I knew Hank Dittmar quite well before he sadly passed away—and I would be delighted to become reacquainted with the prince’s work, not least because earlier this year we held a design quality conference, the first of its kind, which was attended by 380 people from across the sector, and we want to do more of that kind of work, because the responsibility to build more beautifully rests with all of us.

Where the Government are leading, I encourage the private sector to follow. When I bring that message of “more, better, faster” to the sector, I always stress how design matters at every level, from planning to community acceptability: build beautifully and get permission, build beautifully and sell more houses, and build beautifully and communities will actually welcome developers, rather than drive them out of town at the tip of a pitchfork.

Mr Vaizey: First, I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) said: we have had far too many Housing Ministers, and I call upon the Prime Minister to keep this wonderful man in office until the 2022 election and many years beyond. Secondly, I caution against this debate tipping over into an attack on modern architecture. Robin Hood Gardens may not be lamented, but Park Hill in Sheffield—a similar design—has been restored and is much loved. As the Minister who listed Preston bus station to much anger, I am delighted that it is now treasured by the local community.

Kit Malthouse: I acknowledge what my right hon. Friend says, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings said, that is often an accident of ergonomics, form and beauty coming together, just as it did for the roof at the British Museum—an extraordinary structure in which, exactly right, ergonomics and form come together.

Some of the best examples of beautiful buildings are delivered by small and medium-sized enterprises, from self-build to the refurbishment of historic buildings. Sadly, the 2007-08 economic crash killed a number of such growing developers, and we are yet to see a new talent pool emerge. I believe, however, that SMEs are part of the key to the challenge. That is why we are directing our home building fund towards SMEs—to give them the confidence to grow and build, and to raise the bar on design quality. By having more players in the market, we shall get them to compete on innovation and quality.

Ultimately, it comes down to delivering houses that people want to live in, buildings where people want to work and places that people want to call home. More than that, we must build things that elevate and entertain. That is what the Government are hoping to and will deliver in the future. I look forward to working with many hon. Members on that most important of missions. I close by—

Mr Vaizey: London views?

Kit Malthouse: Sorry, yes. I asked my team to update me on the London views. Apparently, there is a campaign by London First and other developers to relax the protections, but so far they remain in the draft London plan. We shall see where that plan lands.

I shall finish my speech by returning to that Larkin poem. Members may remember—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings does—that the most affecting part of that poem is in the second stanza, when Larkin reveals that the couple he has been looking at are actually holding hands. They have been holding hands for the centuries for which they have been lying there. At the end of the poem he ends with that famous line:

“What will survive of us is love.”

In 200 or 300 years’ time, what will future generations see as a symbol of our love for them, projected forward in time? All that will survive of us is those things that we build today. We are already seeing our ambition to ornament their lives and to create the beauty that will enhance their existence for centuries to come, as ours has been enhanced by the generations who came before us.
3.57 pm

Mr John Hayes: Simply to repeat, Ms Dorries, that we are lucky to have a Minister—and, by the way, a shadow Minister—of such calibre. He is right: we are talking about what we do for generations to come—those born later, as I described them.

Speaking of Larkin, urban planners have done to too many of our fellow Britons what Larkin said all our parents do to us. Now it is time for Government to raise their sights to a more distant horizon. Beauty is not a bolt-on, an extra or something that we may opt for; it is intrinsic to developing a sense of place, which is essential to a sense of value and worth, as the Minister clearly understands. That is not only about future generations, but about the common good now.

As the Government move forward on their plans for housing, they need to have a debate about quality and not to be limited to a debate about quantity. It is absolutely right for those two things not to be paradoxical. It is entirely possible to build homes that people want to live in.

I hope that the Minister will make the ambition of 100 new parks come to life; that he will prohibit development on the green spaces where, as I said, people play, make friends, dance and dine; and that he will be insistent that all that he has said today informs the future. It is right for buildings to elevate, as he said, but more than that the buildings and the politics should enthral. That is not merely an aspiration, but the duty of all of us, which is why I am delighted to have introduced this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered beauty and the built environment.

Five Year Forward View for Mental Health

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the five-year forward view for mental health.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. The key purpose of the debate is to represent the recent report of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health, of which I am vice-chair. We published “Progress of the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health: On the road to parity”, which is a report on the progress of the five year forward view at the halfway stage.

I pay tribute to the cross-party group of MPs and peers who took part in the inquiry, particularly the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who is the chair of the APPG; she is with us in this debate and I think she will make some remarks. I also pay tribute to Rethink Mental Illness and to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which provided us with excellent secretariat support and supported us throughout the inquiry. I thank the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who attended the parliamentary launch of the report and engaged in a very helpful question and answer session.

The report is a summary of more than 70 pieces of written evidence, two oral evidence sessions, a focus group of service users and carers, and a visit to a mental health trust. It is a serious and informative piece of work that could help to make a difference in informing the NHS’s long-term plan. There are three main sets of recommendations in the report, including some important ones on joining up work with other services, particularly social care and housing, but this is quite a short debate so I will focus only on two questions.

I am interested to hear from the Minister about the Government’s plans to support people with severe mental illness. The report shows that adults severely affected by mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are left behind. We saw no consistent and coherent approach on how to support people diagnosed with personality disorders. The inquiry heard that there are no targets for how long adults should have to wait to access eating disorder services. Those illnesses have a severe impact on people’s day-to-day lives and can be lifelong conditions. It is not acceptable that people who are the most ill often wait the longest to get care.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Although I appreciate, as he will, how big a task this is, I welcome the Government’s commitment to mental health funding in the Budget. But I am concerned that we are getting nowhere in reaching parity of esteem. The number of children and young people experiencing mental health problems has risen sharply, and they often go to A&E for help. Does he share my view that funding is needed to ensure that children and young people suffering with poor mental health have safe places in the community to turn to for help and support, without having to rely on A&Es, which are already under duress?
Jeff Smith: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. Although I will never say that increased spending on mental health is not good, the announcement in yesterday’s Budget of extra funding for mental health teams in A&Es points to a problem because we should not have to increase spending on A&Es. We should try to cut the number of people who have to go to A&Es at an earlier stage, and we must invest at an earlier stage.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful for the APPG’s work. One of the biggest concerns is about mental health support in further education colleges, which seems to have gone completely off the radar. Both colleges in York have told me that there is increasing crisis in further education, particularly on self-harm by young people—now that there are more exam-based assessments, that is escalating at a pace. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must focus on prevention in FE colleges, to ensure we have the right health professionals based in those colleges?

Jeff Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Child, adolescent and early adult mental health is a big and growing problem.

The five year forward view recognised creating treatment pathways for people with bipolar disorder, adult eating disorders and personality disorders, but halfway through the plan, the inquiry found that those are still to be published. It is vital that NHS England implement in full all pathways recommended in the five year forward view.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Although there has been a commendable focus on increasing talking therapy through the IAPT—improving access to psychological therapies—programme, that tends to be cognitive behavioural therapy. The evidence base for helping people with personality disorder, particularly emotionally unstable personality disorder, is dialectical behaviour therapy. There is a real paucity of other talking therapies such as DBT available throughout the country, but particularly further north than where we are sitting, in London.

Jeff Smith: The hon. Gentleman has great experience and knowledge of those issues and makes an important point. He has anticipated some of the comments I will make and I strongly agree with him.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): We, as MPs, are among the first to come across the sort of patients the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Does he agree that training ought to be provided for MPs, so that we know how to deal with those people when they appear at our surgeries?

Jeff Smith: That is an excellent point; some training packages are available for MPs’ staff. I encourage all colleagues to take advantage of that.

The vast majority of people severely affected by mental illness will receive support within our community mental health team, which is the type of core service that provides help to around 700,000 people in England, often with quite complex needs. Although some specialist services have benefited from additional funding and targets, core services for adults severely affected by mental illness have stood still. Core community services did not receive any funding under the five year forward view, and we found that only £50 million was allocated to other core services nationally.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, there is no drop-in centre for people in crisis. Crisis teams are stretched to the limit, and often people wait for two hours or more to access them. Given the current funding review, does my hon. Friend agree that we must urgently resolve such situations?

Jeff Smith: Again, that is an excellent point and I strongly agree. The report makes it clear that core services are underfunded and under pressure. There has been great success in getting people better access to psychological therapy, but while IAPT is an excellent service it is not designed for people with severe mental illness. Core services are too overstretched to provide timely talking therapies to people with more complex needs, so those who are most ill often have to wait the longest to get help. Simon Stevens, the head of the NHS, said at the Global Mental Health summit that he believed that we must restrick the balance between new talking therapy services for patients with less severe conditions and the core services for those with long-term and severe mental health needs.

We heard many examples of people with severe mental illness struggling to get therapy. One service user came to us; they had a history of psychosis and were told by their GP that if they wanted to access psychological therapy quickly, they should lie to the IAPT team about having psychosis to avoid being rejected for treatment, because it was too difficult to get the treatment they needed for their condition.

In the worst case scenario, people can be hit with the double whammy of being told they are too ill for IAPT but not ill enough for a core mental health team. People are then left struggling. Another service user, Dani, who has a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, spoke at our parliamentary launch and contributed to the report. She said that she felt it was wrong to be called a service user because her experience was mostly of being told that she was not suitable for services, rather than actually using them.

The inquiry saw the consequences of what happens when people do not get timely support in the community. First, there is a rise in inappropriate out-of-area placements. At the end of June this year, there were 645 inappropriate out-of-area bed placements. Secondly, there is a rise in mental health crises. The report notes that attendances at A&E for a mental health problem have risen 94% since 2010. In our inquiry, we heard from service users who expressed their frustration at turning up at A&E and waiting hours to be seen, before being sent home after a brief chat with a professional. Extra services in A&E, as we were promised yesterday, are positive but a much better solution would be intervening so people do not have to go to A&E. A model already exists where mental health calls to 111 or 999 are redirected to a specialised 24/7 support service staffed by experienced psychological wellbeing coaches, social workers and mental health nurses who can provide assessments and real-time support. That is successful and it could be rolled out as a national standard approach, which is something the report recommends.
Mental health crises should not be considered an inevitability for people severely affected by mental illness. It is entirely possible to stop people having to go to A&E in a crisis if community services intervene early enough to support them. Support across the country is patchy, unfortunately, as core services struggle to meet the increased demand on budgets. We should not be creating a system that steps in only when people reach breaking point. That is why the report recommends that NHS England should increase resources for core mental health services, such as community mental health teams. Will the Minister set out how the Department of Health and Social Care will help people with severe mental illnesses who are being left without support?

Secondly, I would like to focus on the issue of workforce. Will the Minister set out how we will ensure that we have the staff to meet the needs of everyone with a mental illness? Throughout the inquiry, we heard regularly that the issue of workforce is the biggest barrier to achieving the five year forward view. When workforce and funding for them do not meet demand, the thresholds for accessing treatment rise. That is a problem not just in core services, but in child and adolescent mental health services and across the board.

**Dr Poulter:** The hon. Gentleman is again making an important point. It is all very well talking about the aspiration of putting more money into mental health and expanding services, but improvement cannot be delivered without the workforce on the ground to provide care. There are serious recruitment and retention challenges across the mental health workforce. If we are talking about the crisis with young people, there is a real problem attracting people into the CAMHS workforce, particularly to become CAMHS consultants and CAMHS psychiatrists. That is an issue that the report picks up in great detail, but I hope he will join me in urging the Government to address this as a matter of urgency.

**Jeff Smith:** The hon. Gentleman makes another excellent point. Health Education England’s plan commits to 19,000 more people working in mental health by 2021, but between March 2017 and March 2018 the number of mental health staff in the NHS increased by just 915 people. That does not look like progress is on target. One in 10 consultant psychiatrist posts is empty and between April 2010 and 2018 there was a 12% fall in the number of mental health nurses. What are the Government’s plans to tackle the problem of the mental health workforce?

The report makes some recommendations and suggests that Health Education England and the Government look at all measures to increase the mental health workforce. There is a huge interest in mental health among young adults. Until we undertook the report, I did not realise that psychology was the third most popular undergraduate course for students starting university in 2016. We should make it easier for those capable, ambitious and keen graduates to work in NHS mental health services.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made the point earlier that recruiting more psychologists for specific therapies, such as dialectical behaviour therapy or cognitive analytic therapy, would mean that people had a wider choice about the type of therapy they received, instead of, as often happens, just being prescribed cognitive behavioural therapy—if they are able to get a prescription at all—because it is the only therapy available.

**Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): As well as having more specialists in the NHS, does my hon. Friend agree that to tackle mental health we need good training in schools, workplaces and all the different parts of society? The point was made earlier that we, as Members of Parliament, need to have training, as well as being able to encourage a more positive attitude to mental health.

**Jeff Smith:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am probably not going to take any more interventions because I want to give the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health time to make remarks and to hear from the Minister. I will rattle through the rest of my comments.

The report suggests that the peer workforce, where people with their own personal experience of mental illness support those who are currently in mental health services, should be expanded. Service users told us that it was invaluable not only in terms of positive role models, but to prevent an “us and them” barrier between patient and professional. It is effective and leads to a reduction in readmissions.

Finally, funding—the elephant in the room, as always. The five year forward view came with a headline commitment of over £1 billion invested each year in mental health by 2021. This has undoubtedly improved lives. However, the APPG heard that it is difficult to be certain that funds are reaching the frontline and that historical underfunding means that mental health is still the poor relation in the NHS. I note that a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research suggests that spending on mental health will have to double from £12 billion to £23.9 billion in the next decade to make parity of esteem a reality.

The mental health investment standard means that every clinical commissioning group has to increase mental health spend in line with its overall increase in health spending. However, last year, 24 CCGs reduced the amount they spent on mental health. Eight CCGs were classed as meeting the mental health investment standard despite the fact that they cut the amount they spent on mental health. We would welcome clarification on what the Government are doing to ensure that each CCG meets that target.

The five year forward view was never intended to solve every problem in our mental health system, but where it has been focused it has made a difference. For example, there has been success in perinatal mental health and improving access to IAPT. This report focuses on where the gaps are. We need to prioritise investment in core services and to ensure that we have a robust NHS workforce. I hope that the Minister, with NHS England, will respond positively to the report and hopefully this will reform NHS long-term planning.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for giving me a chance to speak in the debate, as that was entirely at his discretion. It has
been a real pleasure working with him on the report. I also reiterate his thanks to Rethink Mental Illness and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which have done a huge amount of the work that has been condensed into the report. A great deal of hard work went into it, and they did most of the legwork.

I have been on quite a journey with this report. We originally conceived it back in 2016 and it came to fruition this year, at a moment that feels timely because we are mid-way into the five year forward view. NHS England is working on its long-term plan for the NHS and I hope it will be drawing on the recommendations in the report. The Chancellor has just announced a welcome £2 billion of funding for mental health out of the £20 billion for the NHS.

During the inquiry we heard about some areas of mental health where real progress has been made. We heard some truly inspiring success stories of how the five year forward view and the changes in it are changing people’s lives. For instance, we heard about new perinatal services—four new mother and baby units—which mean that when a mother is severely ill, she will be able to receive in-patient treatment and have her baby there with her, rather than their being separated, as has too often been the case in the past.

We heard about the success of talking therapy services and how many people are getting timely access to them. We also heard about the success of early intervention in psychosis. In the past, a diagnosis of psychosis could be seen as a life sentence, but early intervention really does make a difference and we heard success stories of people recovering and going on to lead mentally healthy lives.

Although there are some real success stories, there is much more to do. The report makes 24 recommendations, but given the time I will mention just three of them. There will be a little bit of repetition of what the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing the debate and all hon. Members present on their contributions and interventions.

First, the report includes the recommendation that the Government develop evidence-based treatment pathways more widely. We heard from the eating disorders team at North West London NHS Foundation Trust that having firm waiting time targets and a clear pathway for treatment had immeasurably improved care, but although the five year forward view included a timeline for creating treatment pathways across all areas of mental health, there are many areas where they have not been implemented.

Secondly, the question of workforce came up time and again as the biggest barrier to achieving the ambitions of the five year forward view for mental health. There is a desperate need to train, recruit and retain more staff at every level. We simply cannot make meaningful improvements to services without the staff to deliver them; there must be new routes into the NHS workforce, making use of psychology graduates—as has been mentioned—and psychotherapists, and bringing in more people with lived experience of mental illness, who do valuable work. It is also important that all frontline staff get some mental health training.

We heard that mental health training now forms a greater part of the training for new nurses and doctors, for instance, but there is a huge established workforce who could benefit from at least some mental health training. We heard from one carer who had done a mental health first aid course and said she had more of knowledge of mental health than her sister, who was a nurse.

Thirdly, core services are truly the backbone of mental health care. We heard that they are consistently struggling to cope with demand, leaving more people unable to get help until they reach crisis point. The focus on some of the new, exciting services has perhaps meant that the focus has turned away from those vital core services.

To sum up, great progress has been made. We are on the road to parity between mental and physical health. I feel optimistic because of the Government’s attention to this agenda and the extra funding coming in for mental health, but there is indeed some way to go.
adult mental health services between 2016 and 2021. That came on top of the £1.4 billion pledged the previous year in recognition of the need radically to improve children and young people’s mental health services.

We have delivered against those funding commitments: last year saw more than ever before spent by the NHS on mental health, with almost £12 billion spent by clinical commissioning groups and on specialised services, such as those for eating disorders. Only yesterday, right hon. and hon. Members will have heard the Chancellor’s announcement of a further £2 billion to fund mental health by 2023-24, expanding crisis services and supporting more people with severe mental illness into employment.

Today, 74% of people referred for treatment following a first episode of psychosis receive treatment within two weeks under the early intervention in psychosis programme, compared with 64% only two and a half years ago. Just under 80% of routine eating disorder referrals are seen within four weeks, compared with 65.1% only two years ago. In 2017-18, the national trajectory of 2,000 more women accessing specialist perinatal care was exceeded and we continue to focus on developing local, integrated pathways in this area.

Things are improving outside NHS settings too. We have heard about the work that should be taking place in colleges—importantly—and workplaces. Our investment in improved facilities for crisis mental health care and changes to legislation have helped to reduce, for example, the number of people detained in police cells following a mental health crisis by more than 95% compared with 2011-12. I am pleased that the report recognised some of those achievements over what has been called a “transformational” period in the history of mental health services in this country.

Referring to what my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said about core services, we recognise that there is still much unmet need in mental health. That is particularly true for those suffering severe mental illness. Across the country, we are seeing innovative examples of community mental health services working well to provide timely support close to home, to help prevent in-patient admissions.

We also need to look beyond the NHS. Public attitudes towards mental health are improving. That is in part due to the Time to Change campaign, for which this Government provided £1 million of funding. We want to be recognised as a global leader when it comes to mental health, which is why, only three weeks ago, we hosted the global inter-ministerial conference.

I know time is running out, so let me turn quickly to some of the other remarks made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington on workforce. We have committed to 21,000 new posts, which will ideally be filled by 19,000 NHS staff. That has been written into local plans and some local areas are making progress, but it is too early to be able to count the number of people in post. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned further education, and as part of the Green Paper on children and young people we will incentivise every school and college to identify and train a senior designated lead for mental health issues.

To conclude, given the time available, we recognise that there is still much work to be done. I am proud of the work that this Government are doing to improve mental health, ensuring that many more people can access vital, high-quality mental health support. I hope we get an opportunity to debate the subject in future, but I also hope I have provided reassurance today that we are absolutely committed to delivering against the commitments set out in the five year forward view for mental health.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).
Local Government Funding: Merseyside

4.30 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government funding in Merseyside.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am happy to welcome several of my Merseyside colleagues to the debate.

The Prime Minister says austerity is over. The Chancellor says austerity is coming to an end. Aside from the clear difference between those two statements, neither is the experience of local government leaders and councillors on Merseyside, nor is it set to be their experience over the next few years. My constituency covers two local authority areas, Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) intends to speak in the debate, so I will focus my remarks on the situation facing Liverpool City Council and he will deal with that facing Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council.

I confine my remarks in that regard to simply saying that the challenge facing Knowsley is equally difficult to Liverpool’s, although it is a smaller authority.

Liverpool City Council has already had to cut £340 million from its budget—some 58% of its total resource—since 2010. This year, it must find a further £41 million of cuts to make up the balance of the £50 million reduction it has been seeking over the city’s three-year budgeting period, which comes to an end next March. By 2020, it will have cut £420 million in total, which was 64% of its budget before austerity was unnecessarily and zealously imposed to such a high degree by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government in 2010. Those figures show that there is a lot more cutting to come over the next two years, regardless of what the Chancellor said to us yesterday. Austerity is set to continue for Liverpool City Council, no matter the measures in yesterday’s Budget.

According to the National Audit Office, local authorities in England have seen a 49% reduction in Government funding since 2010, so the cuts imposed on Liverpool have been far higher than average, despite its people having higher levels of deprivation and poverty than the average. Indeed, Liverpool City Council is ranked as the fourth most deprived local authority in the latest indices of multiple deprivation statistics. In fact, 10 of the city’s 30 wards contain a local area within the 1% most deprived nationally, with one—Speke-Garston—in my constituency. Liverpool is ranked as the third most deprived for health and disability and the fifth most for income and employment.

In any fair system, central Government would mandate below-average cuts on Liverpool; that would happen in any system that took any note of the needs of the people of different areas. However, the way the coalition and Tory Governments since 2010 have imposed austerity most emphatically does not take account of the relative needs of the people of different areas who have to deliver the cuts demanded of them. Liverpool has been doubly disadvantaged by facing a larger cut in addition to having more and greater needs to meet.

Take social care as an example. In 2010, Liverpool City Council spent £222 million supporting adults who need help in the community, either because of age, infirmity or disability. That has been reduced to £152 million, despite our ageing population and our population having higher levels of ill health than in many other areas—as set out in the indices of multiple deprivation—meaning more people need the help provided by adult social care services.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for the leadership she gives to Merseyside MPs on these issues. To put this in context, central Government cuts to St Helens Council’s budget are the equivalent of two years of its social care budgets. Similar to Liverpool, we have an ageing population and an expected increase in people suffering from conditions such as dementia. Does she agree that that is completely unsustainable, and that austerity certainly has not ended, for my constituents or hers?

Maria Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is impossible to see how anybody looking at these facts could assert that austerity is either over or is even coming to an end. We obviously do not know what the Government think between those two poles, but it is one or the other, depending on where they are. From where we are, it does not seem that either assertion comes near to explaining the truth.

In Liverpool, £70 million less is being spent on adult social care alone due to the cuts caused by austerity—this political choice that Governments since 2010 have made. Thresholds for eligibility for that help have therefore clearly had to increase, so fewer people get it despite more people needing it. The lack of that support, which should be there and would have been in the past, creates extra burdens on individuals and their families. That is the direct consequence of these cuts in Government funding.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a timely debate. Coventry has experienced exactly the same sort of local government cuts as Liverpool, and through the loss of grants—that is what caused all this—well over 50% of its budget is really not there anymore. One big problem in Coventry—I am sure my hon. Friend will touch on it—is the funding of children taken into care. She just touched on social care. Lots of families now have to find money for social care that they can ill afford, driving them into the hands of money lenders.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend will know the figures for Coventry very well. He set some out, and they sound similar to some of the figures we have seen on Merseyside. Any application for Coventry to join Merseyside will of course be considered by the appropriate authorities, if my hon. Friend wants to take that back to Coventry.

Nationally, £7 billion has been cut from social care budgets, so the £650 million announced by the Chancellor yesterday—to much fanfare—will make little impact on the size of the problem created by the Governments he has been a member of since 2010. I saw today that that figure will cover not only adult social care but children’s, and it also apparently includes money for NHS winter pressures next year, so perhaps that figure is not quite all it was cracked up to be in the Budget statement. However, even if it were, it would not be enough to deal with many of the problems created by the cuts to Liverpool’s social care that have had to be made in the last eight years and are still ongoing.
What about reserves? Tory Ministers frequently answer questions about the scale of the cuts faced by suggesting that authorities should spend their reserves; we often hear that cry. Liverpool has spent £146 million of its reserves to support social care spending, even at the reduced levels it now provides. Its reserves are down to £17 million, so I hope that the Minister was not planning to tell me that Liverpool City Council should spend its reserves. It is clear that that is not a long-term solution. In fact, it is not a solution that will work for much longer at all. Indeed, the NAO says that one in 10 authorities nationally will have nothing left in three years’ time if they continue to use their reserves to pay for social care, as Liverpool has done. Even if those remaining reserves were spent only on social care and nothing else, local authority reserves would be completely used up by 2022.

What about new money? The Mayor of the city of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, has adopted—quite entrepreneurially, I think—an invest to earn strategy, for which he has been criticised but which has yielded so far an extra £13 million a year in new revenue. His original idea was to use that money to support growth in the local economy. However, because of the extent of the cuts in Government funding and the damage they have done—the dire impact that they have had on some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society in Liverpool—he has had to use the money to support services that would otherwise have been cut even further. For example, all our Sure Start centres have been kept open, even though some of the services they provide have gone. However, the tide of extra need being caused by ongoing cuts in Government support and social security benefits is likely to overwhelm the extra funding that the Mayor has brought in via invest to earn, and to do so soon. In that regard, the roll-out of universal credit will mean 55,000 people in the city being transferred on to it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise the experience in Wirral with the roll-out of universal credit? That has led to a need for 30 extra tonnes of food and created a 32% increase in the use of food banks because of the hardship that it has caused.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend, perhaps unsurprisingly, has anticipated my next point—we tend to be on the same wavelength. The Trussell Trust says that in areas where universal credit has been rolled out, it sees a disproportionate increase—my hon. Friend reports a big increase in Wirral—in food bank referrals, as opposed to a lower increase in other areas. The Chancellor is putting some money back in for universal credit, to ameliorate the cuts made by George Osborne in Department for Work and Pensions budgets, but that will not prevent millions of poor and vulnerable people from losing money. They will just lose a little less—and that is without the administrative chaos and design features of this benefit that cause poverty and destitution in Liverpool. Only the Liverpool citizens support scheme, the mayoral hardship fund and the discretionary housing payments, on which the Mayor spends more than central Government provide in moneys, stand between many families and destitution.

The Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, has repeatedly invited Ministers to Liverpool to inspect the books and tell him just what else he is supposed to try in order to deal with the funding crisis that austerity has created, but not one has taken up the challenge. Indeed, he even sent train tickets to Eric Pickles, when he was Secretary of State, to facilitate a visit, but he did not use them. Perhaps this Minister can take up the offer to inspect the books and see what else he can suggest that Liverpool City Council do; we would be most happy to welcome him. If not, perhaps he could indicate that the Mayor of Liverpool’s suggestion of a royal commission on the funding formula will be seriously considered. After all, with things going as they are, soon there will be no consideration of levels of deprivation or need in any of the ways that funding is allocated to local authorities, nor will any account be taken of the ability of the people of a local area to pay for all that is needed themselves; there will be no elements of redistribution. That is a recipe for entrenching disadvantage and ending social solidarity.

According to the Local Government Association, 168 councils will soon receive no revenue support grant at all and will rely only on business rates and council tax for their income. That disadvantages Liverpool again, because the council tax mix and base is so low. For example, Liverpool has more people than Bristol, but raises £38 million less in council tax, because almost 60% of Liverpool properties are in band A, compared with an average of 24% across the country, and 90% are in bands A to C, compared with 60% nationally. In addition, almost 36% of council tax payers are eligible for a discount because of their circumstances, whereas the national average is 16%. However, Government funding takes no account of these issues. That makes a big difference. If Liverpool was at the national average for these things, that would have meant an additional £97.7 million in council tax available to be collected every year. As it is, Liverpool can raise only £167 million in council tax. Similarly, less is raised in business rates in Liverpool than in many other places, because of the density and mix of local businesses.

Forcing the people of the city to rely, for meeting higher levels of local need, on weaker business rate and council tax yields is not a fair way to fund local services. I therefore finish by asking the Minister to have the courage that his predecessors lacked and visit Liverpool to inspect our books and make some suggestions as to what else, if anything, can be done. I also ask him to address the question of establishing a royal commission on local Government funding to ensure that the Government of which he is a member do not entrench existing deprivation and remove elements of redistribution that have in the past ensured social solidarity and improved life chances, and equality between different areas of the country. We need that now more than ever.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman no later than 5.13, and the guideline limit is five minutes for the Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and then time for the mover of the motion to sum up the debate at the end. That means that the Back-Bench contributions run until 5.13.

Five Members are seeking to catch my eye. Three of them have written to Mr Speaker, but I am a generous soul, so I want to get everybody in. If contributions are
longer than five minutes, those at the end will get less. The first Member who has applied to Mr Speaker is Dame Louise Ellman.

4.46 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this important debate and on the excellent way in which she opened it.

Local government is vital. It is responsible for essential services such as education, social care and road safety. It is a lifeline for people in need. It drives regeneration and civic pride. In Liverpool, the City Council, with Mayor Joe Anderson, has protected people from the brunt of ongoing and severe Government cuts. It has displayed innovation and civic leadership. By 2020, more than 64% of central Government funding will have been removed from Liverpool. That is a real-terms loss of £444 million. For the fourth poorest local authority in the country, that is a great injustice.

The Chancellor’s statement that austerity is ending rings hollow in Liverpool. Government cuts continue as the council struggles to care for people who need social care and children who just want a chance in life. Nurseries remain underfunded and schools still struggle. The impact of the Government’s cumulative cuts in benefits, often affecting working people, takes its toll. Universal credit threatens to make people poorer. We do not know what the Chancellor’s reassurances in the Budget will mean to people on the ground—not very much, I suspect. Rhetoric needs to be matched with positive action.

Despite increasingly vociferous warnings, fire and police services are denied the essential cash that they need to protect the community. Cuts in fire services are causing increasing public concern, and in Liverpool and Merseyside as a whole a gun crime is now increasing. Over the city hangs the threat of Brexit—threats to the economy, to EU-funded initiatives and to the European collaborative research that is so important to our universities and to the city of Liverpool.

I call on the Government to change course and match their words with positive change. They must revisit their plans to put an even tighter squeeze on local services by their words with positive change. They must revisit their plans to put an even tighter squeeze on local services by their words with positive change. They must revisit their plans to put an even tighter squeeze on local services by their words with positive change. They must revisit their plans to put an even tighter squeeze on local services by their words with positive change. They must revisit their plans to put an even tighter squeeze on local services by their words with positive change.

4.49 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone. I would like to add to the congratulations to my sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), on securing this debate at such an important time. As she has pointed out, local authorities in general have seen a cut of nearly 50% to their budgets, but local authorities in Merseyside have suffered even greater cuts.

My local authority, Wirral, has suffered a 53% cut in real terms since 2010, which is above average. That means that it has lost well over half its 2010 budget, which is £635 less in resource every household in Wirral. Wirral’s local authority is expected to continue to cut £130 million more between now and 2021, despite the Chancellor and his jocular toilet jokes in the Budget yesterday.

How do these cuts affect my constituents? Behind all the cuts and the many service reductions we have been forced to experience in the past few years are people who are often very vulnerable, not being looked after or being left to fend for themselves when circumstances make it impossible for them to survive independently. The social safety net has been deliberately destroyed by this Government in pursuit of their ideological obsessions with a smaller state. Not only do they pursue those obsessions and hit the poorest hardest, but when we have debates such as this they smirk and laugh, and do not believe the tales that we bring to the House about the real results their cuts have had. The Minister looks to me to be doing the same again today.

We have seen an increase in food bank use, homelessness and destitution, as well as anxiety and insecurity, which has led to increases in mental health breakdowns. A lot of these cuts are actually false economies. In Wirral, the adult social care budget has been cut by over a quarter since 2010, but because of our low council tax base the capacity to raise tax locally is severely constrained. A council tax increase of nearly 6% this year raised only £8 million, half of which is ring-fenced for social care, but because Wirral has an above average number of older people, that increase does not even cover the extra demand being generated by our ageing local population. It is not acceptable for the national Government to wash their hands of the different levels of demand for social care in different areas and leave council tax payers to pick up the bill when council tax bases vary so dramatically—my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said of Liverpool’s case—between different areas, because of different property prices.

In my constituency, over 11,000 people are providing unpaid care to their loved ones, many for 50 hours a week with little and diminishing help. We have seen real-terms cuts in spending on youth services. When Labour was in government, spending on youth services doubled, but since 2010 it has gone down by 7% nationally. Spending on young people’s services, such as counselling and youth centres, has fallen by over half. Some 1,000 Sure Start centres have closed and many preventive, proactive services have been wiped out. In Wirral, that has led to a huge increase in the number of children taken into care, which is up from 650 two years ago to 810 this year.

These cuts are a false economy, because as less is spent on preventive work, more has to be spent on much more profound and costly interventions later. How is it moral to wait until a young life is ruined, rather than spend less to prevent it from happening in the first place?

In Wallasey, 20 out of 26 schools face budget cuts. With nearly £3 million cut between 2015 and 2020, per-pupil funding has fallen by 8%. Since 2010, 50% of the Merseyside fire authority’s grant has been taken away. Instead of having 42 fire engines, we now have 22, with only 14 available for immediate response. The number of firefighters has reduced by nearly 40% from 927 to a
[Ms Angela Eagle]

merely 580. After years of decline, fire deaths have increased by 10%. The Merseyside police budget cuts have led to the loss of over 1,000 officers and crime is rising. As the recent Home Affairs Committee report demonstrated, the police are becoming less and less able to cope. As crime rises, we see the number of arrests and charges falling.

Once more, the emergency services are so stretched that they can barely cope with emergencies, and they certainly cannot do preventive work, so lives are put at risk as public sector workers face relentless pressure, being expected to do more for less. This is not my definition of fairness and it is not my definition of the end of austerity. It is an ongoing, rolling scandal, which is placed at the door of this Government.

4.55 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this debate and leading it so powerfully. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), she set out fully the impact of austerity on Liverpool City Council.

Last week in this Chamber, we had a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) in which we shared the horrific stories from our constituents about the increased use of food banks, and the impacts of austerity and the changes to social security benefits. I strongly echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said about the efforts of Liverpool City Council, under the leadership of Mayor Joe Anderson, despite the scale of cuts in the support from central Government, still to deliver for the people, and in particular to deliver for some of the most vulnerable communities in our city. I second the idea of a royal commission to really address the issue of the fairness of local government funding. I also pay tribute to those who work in our public services who, despite austerity, do their utmost to deliver the very best services at local level.

I want to focus first on education, and secondly on crime and policing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly said, Liverpool City Council has done its utmost to protect its children’s centres, because we know how powerful the evidence is that investing in the early years of children’s lives makes the biggest difference. If we are serious about seeking a more equal and just society, investment in those early years is crucial. I ask the Minister to speak to his colleagues in the Department for Education about the importance of those early years.

Last week, I raised the issue of the important role that nursery schools play in our communities—I make no apology for raising it again. I have two brilliant nursery schools in my constituency, Ellergreen and East Prescott Road, both of which are rated outstanding by Ofsted. They are very concerned about their long-term funding, because of some of the considerations that the Department for Education is undertaking. We are all concerned that the adoption of a national funding formula poses a threat to our schools’ funding. Schools in my constituency and around the country will not be comforted by getting some money for the “little extras” as the Chancellor set out in his speech yesterday—that is frankly insulting. We need a serious, long-term settlement for schools funding.

I will finish by saying something about crime and policing, because that is an issue of massive concern to my constituents. I ask the Minister to share the issues that have been raised during the debate with his colleagues in the Home Office. Again, this speaks to the question of injustice in funding, which all three of my colleagues have spoken about. Funding cuts have hit all parts of the country, but they have hit some parts much harder than others, and it tends to be the areas with the greatest social and economic need, such as Merseyside, that have been hit the hardest. Merseyside police relies on central Government to provide 75% of its funding. In contrast, Surrey can raise most of its funding for its police locally. Therefore, an equivalent cut to both forces does not hit the two areas the same—it hits Merseyside much harder than it hits Surrey.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) has just pointed out, since 2010 in Merseyside we have lost 1,700 staff and police officers—1,700 gone—and had a cut in the number of police community support officers of around 35%. Last year, the chief constable of Merseyside, Andy Cooke, warned that Merseyside police was reaching breaking point, as budgets are stretched to the limit.

Crime is going up, but officer numbers are at their lowest in years. Office for National Statistics figures show a 14% rise in crime in Merseyside in the year to September 2018. Of particular concern in my constituency are the 18% rise in robbery and the 16% rise in violent crime. I say to the Minister, who speaks for communities and who can lobby his Home Office colleagues, that that has to change. Surely dealing with crime and protecting the public are the most basic responsibilities of any Government.

I ask the Minister please to listen to our chief constable and our police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy. We need a fair deal for policing in Merseyside, alongside a fair deal for local authorities, about which my hon. Friends have spoken so eloquently.

5 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on the typically thorough way in which she introduced this important subject. I will confine my remarks to the effects of the cuts in grant to Knowsley specifically, but before I do, I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and other hon. Friends have said about the impact of cuts on policing and on fire and rescue services.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood indicated, Knowsley Council is the council in the country hardest hit by funding cuts, which amount to £100 million less to spend on vital local services. To bring that down to a human scale, that equates to a cut of £485 in grant support for every person in the borough, compared with a national figure of £188. To bring that down to an even more human scale, Windsor and
Maidenhead Council has had a £49 cut in grant per head and Wokingham Borough Council has had a £43 cut in grant per head. I begin to wonder whether something in the grant formula was weighted towards local authorities that begin with the letter w, but if that had been the case, it would have applied to the Wirral too. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) eloquently described, however, it does not.

Knowsley Council has told me that its biggest challenges are funding children’s social care, which my hon. Friends have mentioned; the need for a permanent funding solution for adult care; and the impact of moving the cost of funding services provision on to council tax payers. Funding social care is not just a problem for Knowsley. In the north-west as a whole, the number of looked-after children has increased by 12% since 2003. In Knowsley, the additional pressures on the budget for children’s social care are expected to exceed £3 million as a result of a combination of increased costs for all placements, even higher increased costs for specialised placements and the scarcity of suitable residential placements.

The Government’s response, however, has been wholly inadequate and falls well short of providing the funding and certainty needed to keep up with growing demands. The Minister will say that there was an announcement in the Budget yesterday. We have not seen how that will be distributed, and we do not know what it will mean for any given local authority, but if the total sum mentioned is distributed evenly, it will hardly make a dent in the difficulties that areas such as Knowsley are experiencing.

Some additional funding for adult social care has been announced in the past few years, but it does not reflect the resources needed to offer adequate and sustainable services and, moreover, it was a one-off. In March 2017, £9 million of additional resources was announced from the better care fund to help to fund increasing demand and rising costs. So far, however, the Government have not confirmed whether that support will continue beyond 2019-20. Can the Minister commit to continuing that funding? If he cannot, the council’s budget will inevitably mean that services suffer still further. Moving the cost of service provision on to local council tax payers is, frankly, nothing short of disgraceful. The move away from a grant distribution formula that provided a weighted recognition of the needs of an area is entirely regressive in how poorer, more deprived areas are funding children’s social care, which my hon. Friends have mentioned, but if that had been the case, it would have applied to the Wirral too. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) eloquently described, however, it does not.

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Local Government Funding: Merseyside

5.6 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for securing the debate and for the manner in which she opened it. I am honoured to be among my hon. Friends representing constituencies on Merseyside, especially in the face of a Tory Government who have chosen to impose unfair and disproportionate cuts on our constituents. I use the word “chosen” carefully because, as we know, austerity is a choice, which makes the damage done to our constituents’ lives so much worse. It is not just what is in the pot but how the Government have chosen to cut it up that has hit the most deprived the hardest, because the Government have removed the weighting for deprivation from many of their funding formulas. As we saw in the Budget yesterday, those cuts are not going away anytime soon, despite the Prime Minister’s promise that “austerity is over” earlier this month.

Tory cuts have hit Merseyside so hard that there has been a £440 million reduction in Liverpool City Council’s Government support since 2010-11, which is a cut of 64% to the council’s overall budget. We are at the point at which our most basic services are in crisis, and many hon. Friends have articulated examples of where that is the case.

The revenue budget of Merseyside fire and rescue service has been reduced from £73 million to £59.9 million. These cuts might be just figures on a spreadsheet to some, but they have real-life consequences. Our fire and rescue authority has been forced to reduce the number of firefighters it employs from 923 to 620, and to reduce the number of fire engines from 42 to just 24. In turn, the response time for life-risk incidents is on average 35 seconds slower than in 2010-11. What if there were a major incident in Merseyside?

Similarly, Merseyside police has faced startling cuts from central Government, as my hon. Friends have said. Many hon. Friends have articulated the connection between local authority funding and our police, and how we have been disproportionately hit. Our police workforce has been cut by nearly a quarter, so we have 1,600 fewer police staff than in 2010-11. I ask the Minister to reflect on that and I hope he is listening carefully.

Ultimately, the combination of all the cuts to our local authority, our fire service and our police force has led to a reduction in service for many different community services throughout the course of life—from our children’s centres to our youth services, to our leisure and recreation service, to what happens on our roads, to our community services and to services for the elderly and social care.

We have an incredibly stretched council, fire service and police workforce who do so much in such challenging circumstances, and what we are seeing is an impact on real life for too many of our constituents. We are seeing an increase in people in crisis. We are here today because we think it is socially and morally illiterate to see so many people in crisis. It is also financially illiterate. We are sitting here in front of a Minister from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but this situation has wider, far-reaching consequences for
[Luciana Berger]

all Departments. We have heard about the impact on our national health service and that we are going to see £20 billion extra spent on our NHS, but again this disproportionate focus on crisis is so much more expensive. It does not make any economic sense.

Other colleagues have clearly articulated the impact of cuts, including the increase in crime. I will just reflect on the fact that we are now seeing the most brutal run of gun violence in Liverpool in recent years. In just a 10-day period at the beginning of this month, there were two fatal shootings, one of which was in my constituency, and four non-fatal shootings. This increase in serious crime has far-reaching and serious consequences for our constituents.

However, it is not until we compare the cuts that we have sustained on Merseyside with those elsewhere that we truly see the disproportionate level of austerity with which our constituents have been burdened. Whereas each household in Merseyside has experienced a cut of £712.57, the average reduction per household across England is just £320.99. That is still an unwarranted reduction, but of course it is nowhere near the cuts that the people of Merseyside have to cope with in one of the most deprived areas of the country. It is nothing short of a tragedy that the Government’s own figures have shown that if Liverpool City Council had been subject to that same average reduction, it would have been £71.6 million better off in 2019-20 than it is expected to be. What is worse and most galling is that some authorities have seen an increase in their spending power—colleagues have mentioned Surrey.

Neglect by a Tory Government is nothing new to the people of Merseyside, whose independence and resilience make our region proudly what it is, and our city, under the leadership of Joe Anderson, is doing so much in spite of this Government. Can the Minister tell us when our constituents will be given an equal chance and some relief from this disproportionate burden?

5.12 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I would say that it is also a pleasure to respond to the debate, but it is not a pleasure at all; it is heartbreaking, when we consider the human stories that sit behind the numbers that we have heard today. However, I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for how they have stood up to represent their communities in the face of absolutely devastating cuts to vital public services.

I should declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I will use some of the LGA’s information in my speech. The truth is that austerity is not over, but it was never going to be over, because as things stand the Government do not believe in strong local public services. We have heard talk today about how the Government do not like a big state. The truth is that the Government actually do not mind a big state, provided that it is a big national state, because the workforce data today says that the national Government workforce is the biggest since comparable records began, compared with local government, which is now at its smallest since comparable records began. The disproportionate cut has not only been to local government; within England the most deprived communities have been the hardest hit. The most deprived communities have seen cuts of about £220 per person, compared with about £40 per person in the least deprived, so austerity has been targeted on local government and then within local government it has been targeted on the areas that could least afford to take the hit, in the way that we have seen.

The Government have completely ignored pleas from the cross-party LGA to do two things: first, stop the in-year cut of £1.3 billion; and, secondly, fund forward the £5.8 billion that would have addressed homelessness, adult social care and children’s services. Let us be honest—when it comes to the £410 million that is being put forward, the majority of people who work in social care are paid the minimum wage. When the national minimum wage goes up in April, those people will rightly be uplifted, but there is a cost to that for the providers. Much of the money announced in the Budget will go to additional care for over-65s who need it, but to pay people who are being paid the lowest possible rate for providing an essential community service. I do not believe that is fair, the LGA does not believe that is fair and councils across the country do not believe that is fair, but again we see the Government turning a blind eye to it.

We all know where the real impact has been felt; we know the numbers on adult social care and the fact that 1.2 million people who would have had care in 2010 do not get that care today. We know that there are more young people who have been taken into care because they are at risk if they are kept at home, and the cost of that to local authorities. We also know, because the Government have walked away from their responsibilities, that the only way that councils can fund that care is to reduce eligibility and take the money from vital neighbourhood services.

The services that council tax payers see and value that come from the council tax that they pay have been the very services that have been taken away to fund the pressures on people’s services in every community in the country. The public say, “I’m paying more council tax, but the bins are being emptied less often, the local library has closed and the park doesn’t get maintained in the way that it used to.” All those really important services have been affected.

I hoped that when we had a change in Secretary of State that the new Secretary of State would finally have the ear of the Treasury, so that they could finally get a fair hearing and make the case for these vital community services, but it strikes me that one or two things have happened. Either the Ministry did not bother making the case in the first place, or—it could be both these things—the Treasury just does not care about the human impact of austerity and how we have seen it distributed across the country.

What I want to know, what people in the Chamber want to know and what people in England want to know is, what will the Minister do to address such chronic underfunding? It will be on his watch that an older person will die because they do not get the social
that the hon. Lady is focused on keeping council tax low. Indeed, the Government have ensured that council tax today is lower in real terms, across the country, than it was in 2010. We have heard various suggestions from Labour Members about doubling council tax, which is something I assume the hon. Lady, being on the side of hard-working taxpayers like us, would reject.

The idea that the funding formulas do not take account of deprivation or the differing ability of areas to raise council tax is totally erroneous. For example, when the adult social care precept was introduced, it was understood that different areas would raise different amounts from it, which is why in the incremental billions of pounds that the Government have injected into the social care system directly through the better care fund there is an equalising measure to take that into account. That is exactly why, today, the most deprived authorities have a core spending power per household—taking into account all those things, council tax included—that is 23% higher than that of richer authorities. Indeed, that is why areas with larger council tax bases provide more of their area’s resources from council tax; Merseyside provides less than half of the amount those areas do, because the council tax base in Liverpool is that much lower. It is totally wrong to suggest that that is not taken into account.

I think it was alleged that I, or the Government, had removed deprivation from funding formulas. I can categorically say that I have not removed it from any funding formula. We are in a root and branch review of how local government is funded. We are in the midst of various consultations and I would be delighted to have hon. Members’ suggestions.

Mr Howarth: If that is the case, will the Minister explain why Knowsley, which is one of the most socially deprived parts of the UK, has had a £100 million cut in its grant? His figures just do not add up.

Rishi Sunak: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that Knowsley’s core spending power per household is about 20-something per cent. higher than the average for a similar metropolitan authority, which takes into account exactly his point. He talked about the fair funding review and, as I said, that is exactly where all the issues will be considered, ensuring that deprivation or, indeed, multiple other factors, are taken into account in the new funding formula.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Rishi Sunak: No. I will try to make some progress.

When it comes to that point, I am convinced and confident that those factors are taken into account. Indeed, as we restructure the fair funding formula, they will continue to be taken into account fairly and accurately.

Beyond Government grants, driving economic growth locally is the only sustainable way to ensure that we can raise the money we need to fund our services, and business rates retention is one such opportunity. I am delighted, and I am sure hon. Members here will join me in recognising, that Merseyside is in the fortunate position of being a 100% business rates retention area, which means that the local councils keep all the growth they generate from those rates. That is not something that is enjoyed by every local authority—[ Interruption. ]
Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We do not really want sledger in the Chamber. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) is sitting opposite the Minister and he must be heard with courtesy. Her side of the House was heard with courtesy during all its contributions. I know that the hon. Lady’s attempt to intervene was not accepted by the Minister, but she could have another go. However, she is more likely to be successful if she does not keep shouting across the Chamber.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I think the hon. Lady was being snide about the fact that Merseyside is a business rates retention pilot. I am sure that the £54 million that Merseyside will keep this year in additional funding as a result of the pilot is nothing to be snide about, and will make an enormous difference on the ground, helping the people I know she cares about. Many other local authorities across the country would be happy to be one of the pilot areas, so if she thinks that Merseyside would rather not be one and would give up the opportunity to others, I would be happy to talk to her afterwards.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Rishi Sunak: I will try to make some progress.

Business rates retention is not the only incentive for local growth, as it sits alongside the other support the Government give to local authorities’ wider ambitions through local growth deals. For example, £2 million has been invested to create the first dedicated digital skills academy in the UK, at the City of Liverpool College, and more than £13 million has been invested in a highway infrastructure scheme comprising a series of essential and integrated improvements along the A565 corridor. In sum, the Government strongly support Merseyside’s economic growth, whether through direct investment or business rates retention, and thus enable it to fund services over the years to come.

Dame Louise Ellman: Will the Minister give way?

Rishi Sunak: I will make some progress.

The second vision I outlined, which is undeniably one of the most crucial roles for local government, is to continue to help the most vulnerable in our society. It is local authorities, as we have heard, that support the elderly, the disabled and our children in need, and we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to councils for their incredible work. I am delighted that the Government back local authorities to carry out those vital duties. Last year, the Budget provided an additional £2 billion for social care. Earlier this year, another £240 million was announced for social care winter funding, and in the Budget yesterday the Chancellor announced that a further £650 million will be provided for care services next year.

In contrast to what we have heard, the flexibility to use the funding for things such as children’s services is something that local authorities have specifically asked for. They will have the flexibility in each local area to use the funding for different care services, rather than its use being dictated by the first Government. I would have thought that all Members appreciated their local areas having such flexibility to make the best use of the money, in the way they see fit.

I am pleased to say that that increased investment and better working between the NHS and local government is paying dividends on the ground. We have seen social care free up 949 beds a day since the peak two years ago—a 39% reduction in social care delayed transfers of care. In Merseyside, progress has been seen particularly in St Helens, and I commend the local authority on reducing such transfers by 72% since the February 2017 peak.

I have mentioned the troubled families programme, which is making amazing strides to support our society’s most vulnerable families. When I visited the Clubmoor children’s centre in Liverpool, it was a privilege to talk to several of the families participating and to see the life-changing work at first hand. I am proud to say that the Government have invested £1 billion in the programme over this spending cycle, with 130,000 families nationally achieving significant and sustained progress against the goals they have been set. In almost 17,000 of the families, one or more of the adults has moved into work, and the families I spoke to told me that that was central to their ambitions.

Across Merseyside, 10,000 families are being helped with more than £20 million of funding, and I pay tribute to Liverpool City Council in particular for doing a very good job, working with early help assessments. We heard from the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) about the importance of early intervention. Referrals to children’s services in Liverpool were down 3% in the most recent year—

Mr Howarth: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. I want to place it on record that, had he been here, my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) would have made a significant contribution, but he is, in fact, not here.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Thank you for that point of clarification. It will be on the record.

Rishi Sunak: I apologise to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who mentioned the importance of early intervention. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the point of order. That great work in the last year builds on three successive years of reductions in referrals to children’s services.

We talked about the importance of local authorities in building strong communities and the Government back that, whether through the funds for Liverpool City Council from the controlling migration fund, ensuring that communities are connected through the roads fund that was announced yesterday, or bringing high streets together and creating pocket parks—something that Liverpool has benefited from. Whether through building economic growth, supporting communities or helping the vulnerable, the Government are determined to recognise the role that local government plays and to back it with what it needs.

5.28 pm

Maria Eagle: I am disappointed that the Minister chose to take away half of my time to respond. I am afraid he did not deal with the points that were made in the debate, and that is a shame. It is ridiculous for him to suggest in the way he did that the Government take account of deprivation. I would like to see how he came up with the figures in his speech. Liverpool’s local
authority has lost 64% of its money, and Knowsley 58%. Our police have had the worst cut in the country, losing 31% of their money, with the fire authority losing 50% of theirs. Liverpool Community College has lost £5 million over the past four years. If that is strongly supporting Merseyside, I hope that the Minister and his Government will stop supporting us, because it is terrible.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 31 October 2018

Mr Philip Davies in the Chair

Hospice Funding and the NHS Pay Award

9.30 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered hospice funding and the NHS pay award.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I welcome everyone to the debate. It is half-past nine in the morning, and the good number of people attending highlights the importance of, and interest in, this subject. I am pleased to have been able to secure the debate.

When the Government announced that they would give our hardworking national health service staff a pay award that freed them from the constraints of the 1% public sector pay cap and was definitely higher than the pay freeze that many NHS staff have endured since 2010, I—like many MPs, I am sure—was very pleased for those staff, especially as I used to be one of them. When I worked as a clinical scientist in the NHS, I saw my take-home pay reduce year on year from 2010 to 2014, at which time I was elected to this place.

My message is certainly not that our hard-working NHS staff do not deserve this pay award; they deserve it, and more. The question is how the pay award will be funded by the charitable sector that is commissioned to provide NHS services. In April this year, I was contacted by the chief executive of my local hospice, Springhill, which provides end of life care to my constituents in Heywood and Middleton and to the wider borough of Rochdale. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) in his place; while he serves the whole borough, it is in his constituency, and I am sure he will have a useful contribution to make.

The chief executive of my local hospice raised three issues with me. The first was whether the Government have considered the impact of the increases in NHS pay on the hospice sector.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): This is an incredibly important topic for debate, not least for Bolton Hospice, which is just outside my constituency. Does the hon. Lady agree that the pay increase causes problems not only in staff retention, but in the recruitment of new staff? We need very dedicated and skilled nurses to work in our hospices.

Liz McInnes: Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will go on to talk about recruitment and retention and the problems that this issue is causing to our hospices in Bolton, in Rochdale and, I am sure, up and down the country.

The chief executive raised three issues with me; I have outlined the first, but the second was whether the effect of the pay increase on voluntary sector hospices had been calculated. The third point was whether voluntary hospices would be able to access additional Government funding to be able to afford the NHS pay increase.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that these changes will only reinforce existing recruitment and retention pressures, and agree that the Government should ensure that they take steps to address staffing issues as well as pay changes?

Liz McInnes: There is a theme developing on recruitment and retention. We have shortages of particular groups of staff, and a two-tier pay arrangement for different NHS providers will only exacerbate those problems.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The points that colleagues have made seem to reflect the situation around the country. The hospice in my constituency, St Andrew’s, provides end of life and respite care for adults and children. The chief executive spoke to me when I went to the opening of its new garden, and expressed exactly the same concerns and fears about future staffing arrangements. The hospice has an incredibly dedicated team of staff, but fears losing them if they can get better pay elsewhere in the NHS.

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend highlights the problems that hospices up and down the country are experiencing with the recruitment and retention of staff. I will explore those issues further in my speech.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Maybe the hon. Lady will come on to this in her speech, but has she looked at the different effects that the pay rise has on hospices for adults and hospices for children, and whether there is effectively a two-tier system in the way that those services are delivered?

Liz McInnes: That is an interesting question. In terms of hospice funding, children’s palliative care tends to receive less NHS funding, so I would imagine the problem is exacerbated for children’s hospices, because they will have to find proportionally more money to fund the pay award than adult hospices. It is an important point, and I hope the Minister will be able to shed some light on those issues when she sums up at the end.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): As my hon. Friend says, we share a hospice. She said—I am not picking up on the phrase she used—that the hospice will need to raise more money. Raising money is the crux of this issue, because something like 70% of the funding for Springhill Hospice comes from charitable giving and less than 30% from public funds. Raising more money, unless the Government are prepared to put their hand into the taxpayer’s pocket, is nearly impossible. If the hospice cannot raise more money, the truth is that it will be a smaller service, and both those who are dying and their families will be unable to obtain this amazingly well-appreciated service.

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is the crux of the debate: a pay award has been decided on and agreed with the trade unions, but the Government do not seem able or willing to fund that pay award for non-NHS organisations.
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I am lucky enough to have the renowned St Christopher’s Hospice in my constituency, and Demelza, which provides children’s hospice care, is also nearby and serves my community. Those hospices will have to find £200,000 a year each to fund the pay rise. Does my hon. Friend agree that the pay rise must be matched by central Government funds in order for our hospices to carry on providing their excellent services to our communities?

Liz McInnes: St Christopher’s Hospice got in touch with me about this debate, so I have had some communication with it about the problems it is experiencing. Sadly, those problems are replicated in hospices up and down the country, and it is important that we find a pot of funding to finance the NHS pay award.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Queenscourt Hospice serves my constituents and their families and carers. Like all hospices, it plays an incredibly important part in delivering NHS services, but it can only play a full part if it is fully funded. It faces a £250,000 increase in its wage bill in order to do just that. Is it not the point that we are asking the Government to provide additional funding to allow these hospices to play a full part in delivering NHS services, but it can only play a full part if it is fully funded. Is it not the point: hospices seem to be facing a choice of asking the community to give them extra money, or reducing the service they provide now?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend makes an important point: hospices seem to be facing a choice of asking the community to give them extra money, or reducing the service they provide.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Am I correct in my understanding that hospices adopting the full Agenda for Change will receive Government assistance? Perhaps the Minister will clarify that. The difficulty for hospices in adopting it is that they lose control of their salary budget. The difficulty is in getting that balance right, and I hope that the Government will be able to help.

Liz McInnes: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will explore the Agenda for Change later, because adopting it presents huge difficulties for non-NHS organisations.

The three points from the chief executive of Springhill Hospice were tabled as parliamentary questions. Sadly they received identical answers that included: “We are considering carefully the impact of any agreement on non-NHS organisations such as hospices that may be affected by the proposed pay deal; however no decisions have been made. Staff in hospices do a fantastic job in delivering world-class care and the Department remains fully committed to improving palliative and end of life care.”

In July, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, asking for an update on the issue. The response stated that he “understood concerns” that “hospices may find recruitment and retention challenging if some of their staff choose to leave in favour of organisations that employ staff on the Agenda for Change contract”.

In summary, the Government will finance the pay award for non-statutory, non-NHS organisations only for organisations employing staff on the Agenda for Change contract, which is the nationally agreed set of terms and conditions for most NHS staff. The rationale for that was that:

“Additional funding relies on organisations employing staff on the Agenda for Change contract, because it is the Agenda for Change pay and non-pay reforms that together will help deliver the productivity improvements the Chancellor asked for in return for additional pay investment.”

What are the reforms that can only be made under Agenda for Change? On examination, it seems to be an emphasis on training and apprenticeships and a programme of appraisal and personal development. There is also a slightly vague statement on the improvement of the health and wellbeing of NHS staff, to improve levels of attendance, with a reference to “positive management of sickness absence”, whatever that may mean.

The response from Springhill Hospice was grim. The chief executive wrote to me:

“Very few charitable hospices employ their staff on Agenda for Change contracts, and as a result, Springhill Hospice, along with many other hospices, will miss out on the funding being set aside by the Government. This will place us at a considerable disadvantage in recruiting and retaining essential staff to deliver the services that we offer to people with life-limiting illness in this community, and will leave us with a significant additional cost.

Recruiting and retaining skilled staff is a critical challenge for us, and in order to remain competitive, we will have little choice but to increase pay for clinical staff. Over the course of the three-year NHS pay deal, we estimate that this will bring an additional cost to the hospice of in excess of £250,000. Without support from the Government, this extra cost can only be met by asking our communities to give more, or by reducing the services that we provide.

We are already asking our community for in excess of £2 million contribution each and every year, and in an area of high deprivation, I can only envisage that any additional ‘ask’ will not be able to be met by our community, so sadly we may have to look at service reduction, which in turn will place additional burden on an already stretched NHS.

NHS staff will start to see the pay increase reflected in their pay packets from this month onwards. Without government support, Springhill Hospice will see a significant additional cost fall to the charity as a consequence.”

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. Does she agree that one problem, shared by Longfield Hospice in my constituency, is the opaqueness about the money that the NHS puts into the hospice movement? It does not put much in, and it is unclear why it comes and what it should be used for.

Liz McInnes: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. While preparing for the debate, I tried and failed to get clarity on how NHS funding is allocated to hospice services. I hope that the Minister will provide some clarity on that.

The chief executive of Springhill said that the Department’s response was unhelpful, and that if the hospice were to utilise Agenda for Change terms and conditions in full, it would have to go through a massive consultation with staff and would need to change everyone’s terms and conditions of employment, assuming that there was buy-in through the consultation process. In addition, it would have to employ a very bureaucratic appraisal system—it already has robust appraisal processes in place—while adopting the Agenda for Change process would necessitate a massive investment in staff training, which would again add to the cost burden.
Melanie Onn: The chief executive of a social enterprise that provides social care in my constituency under the Care Plus Group TUPE-ed out several staff in order to continue to provide those services. Those staff are on the Agenda for Change contracts, but they will not receive the Government uplift in pay, because as the chief executive says: “The plan is to fund only NHS trusts and foundation trusts, to pay the uplift directly to them.”

The issue goes much wider in the healthcare sector than hospices. It will affect providers of health and social care in our communities, as well as those staff contracted out from the NHS, including porters, orderlies and caterers. I know that Unison is campaigning for those staff who have been privatised within the NHS. Does my hon. Friend think that all those staff are integral to providing healthcare for all of us, and should be included in the uplift?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this goes wider than hospices. It applies to non-statutory, non-NHS organisations that provide essential services to the NHS. Staff being TUPE-ed out is difficult, and I hope the Minister will consider it in her remarks. The pay award has to be funded from somewhere, and it is extremely unfair if NHS staff are TUPE-ed out to a non-NHS provider and lose out on the pay award as a result.

The chief executive of Springhill talked to me about the role of the clinical commissioning group, saying she hoped that “the CCG will recognise this significant additional burden when agreeing our annual contract”. and that it will “not be expecting us to reduce our costs this next financial year.” I know, and the interventions I have taken show, that the problems experienced by Springhill Hospice are replicated up and down the country, and I am grateful to hon. Members for sharing their experiences from their own communities.

Hospice UK estimates that, over the course of the three-year NHS pay deal, charitable hospices will face an additional bill of between £60 million and £100 million. It says that the Department of Health and Social Care’s criteria for non-NHS providers to access the additional funding set aside to support the implementation of the NHS pay award exclude the majority of the country’s charitable hospices from that essential support. The Department itself has acknowledged that most charitable hospices do not employ staff on NHS terms and conditions, as the staff working in hospices are not NHS employees. However, as hospices recruit their staff from the same local pool as the NHS, they have little option but to mirror the pay award made to NHS staff in order to recruit and retain the staff they need. As a consequence, hospices face a difficult choice: they must either ask their local communities to donate more to fund the pay award or look at options to reduce services proportionately to cover the cost. Neither is a palatable option for the hospices or for the communities that they serve.

The Department maintains that hospices should look to their clinical commissioning groups for additional support, yet research by Hospice UK shows that in recent years two thirds of hospices in England have seen their NHS funding cut or frozen—in many instances, for several consecutive years. In the absence of tariffs reflecting the costs of care, the NHS currently makes a contribution towards the costs of providing hospice care. It is on average just 30% of the costs of providing adult hospice care services and just 15% for children’s hospice services, although that funding varies widely around the country.

Hospice UK has suggested a solution to the problem, which is to follow the precedent set in 2004, when the employer contribution to the NHS pension scheme was doubled from 7% to 14%. At the time, the Labour Government acknowledged that charitable hospices would face an additional cost that they could not recover from elsewhere, so they set aside a national pot of funding to be distributed centrally to mitigate the impact. That worked very well and is a model that would work well in relation to the NHS pay increase by recognising the unintended consequences for charitable hospices while maintaining the integrity of the deal negotiated and agreed with the NHS trade unions.

Additionally, I have been contacted by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who tells me that he has secured an agreement for 3,000 healthcare workers in his constituency who work for a social enterprise to receive Government funding to finance the pay rise, so clearly a precedent has already been set. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s comments on that.

The pay deal that has been agreed is a pay deal for NHS staff and is welcomed. Since this debate was announced, I have also been contacted by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

Melanie Onn: It has taken me a little while to catch up, but did my hon. Friend just say that a colleague has managed to secure an independent agreement that the pay deal will be honoured for some workers in a hospice setting? If so, how is it possible that one person can get such an agreement from Government but everyone in this Chamber who is raising issues cannot?

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend: that is exactly the point that I wanted to make. A deal has been done in Plymouth for a social enterprise provider that is not a hospice but a provider of mental health services. Obviously, smaller deals are being done. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is not able to be with us today, but I was very interested in the evidence that he sent me. The Department of Health and Social Care needs to look at the smaller deals that have been done and ask itself what on earth is going on.

To return to the issue of physiotherapists, they are clinical staff whose role in hospice care is sometimes forgotten. The CSP told me that its members overwhelmingly backed the pay changes when consulted earlier this year. It pointed out to me the importance of the physiotherapist’s role in enabling people with a terminal illness to stay active as long as possible—a really important role—and went on to say that with the current shortage of physiotherapists, it is relatively easy for staff to change roles if they wish to do so, and that employers who cannot broadly match NHS pay rates will find it increasingly difficult to recruit staff.

There is clearly real concern that the NHS pay award will have an unforeseen but damaging impact on charitable hospices and other organisations that are already at a significant disadvantage compared with other non-NHS associations.
providers in not receiving reimbursement for the costs of the care that they provide to NHS patients. A sustainable hospice movement is an essential component of delivering the improvements in end of life care that the Government have rightly sought. The Government must look again at the conditions imposed on non-NHS providers and consider how funding may be made available to prevent a diminution of the end of life care service.

Sir Desmond Swayne: May I therefore, through the offices of the hon. Lady, put in my bid to the Minister for just such a local agreement for Naomi House and the Oakhaven Hospice in Hampshire?

Liz McInnes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but we want a national agreement rather than a piecemeal set of local agreements. I hope that that will be addressed today.

I shall conclude by quoting NHS Employers: “Patients are at the heart of everything the NHS does.” How does that square with the Department of Health and Social Care’s refusal to finance the pay a ward for hospices, and how is that refusal putting terminally ill patients, at the time when they are most in need of care, at the heart of our NHS?

9.57 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for securing the debate. “Fantastic” is probably the wrong word to use, but this is an important opportunity for us to speak about the great work that hospices do, the part that they play in all our local communities and how they help people and their families at the most difficult times of their lives. It is an honour to take part in the debate. I want to talk about the role of hospices, how they contribute to the desire to integrate health and social care and, as a result, how they must be funded to deliver the great work that they do.

This may seem a strange thing to say, but I have spent my most special moments at the bedside of someone in a hospice. Over the years and even as an MP, I have taken the opportunity to sit alongside people and their families in our local hospice, St Julia’s, which is just on the edge of my constituency, and I always leave with an incredible sense of gratitude for the work that the hospice does and how it helps people at that difficult time. It helps people to live and die well, which is what I am sure we would all love to be able to do when the time comes.

Let me explain what I have learned in recent years. Even now, the word “hospice” assumes that that is where we will die if we have—dare I say it—the right kind of illness to justify that, but I am learning that hospices are actually far from just places to die. People can go into one when they are very sick and come out a week or two later, having had various things done to help them, to get their body working again and to identify the right medicine. Hospices can give people time to work out what medicine or drug is really the right one for them. My mum was ill for a very long time. She was given a few weeks to live, but actually lived for more than a year. She spent 10 days in a hospice when we really thought it was the end and then she went on for a good six or seven months after that, simply because the hospice was able to correct her medication and—well, “flush her out” is probably the way to put it. It was lovely to come together as a family and sit alongside her, and to give my dad a break; he had about 10 days of really important respite. The hospice movement across the country, in my constituency and across Cornwall is fantastic. When I go there, it is a different experience from when I go to sit beside the bed of someone in an urgent care setting who is also reaching the end of their life.

In Cornwall, we are learning that hospices are not just about taking people in the closing days or months of their lives, but about alleviating pressure on urgent care by taking people out of a ward where it is not really appropriate for them to be in their last few days, and on community care. In response to trying to get the money it needs, our hospice has done a great bit of work by going out to homes and supporting people there in their last few days and weeks.

The point is that, by properly funding hospices and all the work they do, I am convinced that we would create a saving for the wider NHS as well as the beds that are needed for other people. That is important in my constituency, because our main hospital is in special geographical circumstances. The hospice movement across the world where there is a lot of deprivation and average earnings are low, so the rest of that money was being found by people who were not awash with cash. I do not know that it has improved much since; we are still one of the areas that receives the least money for our hospice care.

That is frustrating, because people are dying in the urgent care centre who should be in a hospice. Three weeks ago, I spent time with a family who were desperate to get their mum out of my local hospital, which is part of the urgent care set-up. I do not want to be unfair to the hospital team, but unfortunately, they were so keen to get the lady home that they waited for care packages that did not arrive, and she died in the hospital when she could have been in the hospice.

Melanie Onn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point, which raises an issue that I have had with a constituent. His wife was sent home supposedly well after going into hospital for urgent treatment but sadly she died two days later. Going to the local hospice, St Andrews, would probably have been a much better option for her, but it had not been thought of in that process.

Derek Thomas: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I have heard several stories where that has been the case. Separate to the debate, there is an obsession—I
use that word because it might get the Minister’s attention, although it may be the wrong one—with getting people home at every possible opportunity. When I sit with those people, some of whom are desperately lonely, I ask whether that is right for them or whether hospices, community hospitals and other settings would be more appropriate. I want us, as leaders and politicians, to be careful not to create an assumption that home is always the best place, because I do not believe that. It certainly was not for my mum in the last days and weeks of her life.

Addressing some of the challenges requires an uplift in the funding available to hospices across the board, and we must pass on pay increases to nursing staff. I say again that when I go into my hospice, the working environment is very different from that in the urgent care centre, but I have already said that Cornwall is a low-wage area with a high cost of living due to the beautiful environment that we live in, which attracts people and pushes up the cost of housing. It is expensive to live in my part of the world, so nurses are not choosing to leave the hospice setting because they prefer urgent care—obviously, we need them there as well, so I am not trying to discourage that—but because they need the money to live. We should not be saying, at this stage, “It is okay, because hospices are a different environment to work in and they might prefer it there, so they will settle for lower wages.” I hope that we would never assume or expect that.

I met the chief executive of Cornwall Hospice Care soon after the pay award, and he expressed concern that the money being offered to NHS nurses and staff would have a negative impact on hospices and other parts of the system where people are not directly employed by the NHS. I agreed to raise that in the House at the first opportunity, which I have done, and I am grateful for this opportunity to do so as well.

I know that I am among friends when I say that the value of hospice care is not underestimated. The work that hospices do for children and adults is fantastic. They are an essential part of bringing health and social care together and ensuring that people are cared for in the right setting and as close to home as possible. We all know that it is better to be near our families, whatever our health situation, and certainly during the last moments of our life.

As I have said, people are dying in my urgent care centre, which has already been judged as poor for palliative care, when there are beds in the hospice not far away. That must be addressed, and I want the Minister to intervene to put pressure on the system—or systems, at the moment—on the question of why we cannot do more. There has been progress in the last three years towards working better together, but making the right decision is painfully slow for somebody who does not actually have the time for that decision to be made. There have been improvements in working together, and the managers in all the systems in Cornwall, including the hospices, have healthy relationships, but things seem to be getting stuck at ward level, so patients are potentially not getting the best care.

As I have said, hospices now do fantastic work in the community, which has already been judged as poor for palliative care, when there are beds in the hospice not far away. That must be addressed, and I want the Minister to intervene to put pressure on the system—or systems, at the moment—on the question of why we cannot do more. There has been progress in the last three years towards working better together, but making the right decision is painfully slow for somebody who does not actually have the time for that decision to be made. There have been improvements in working together, and the managers in all the systems in Cornwall, including the hospices, have healthy relationships, but things seem to be getting stuck at ward level, so patients are potentially not getting the best care.

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life and hospices can typically attract high numbers of volunteers and to generate significant levels of charitable income from within their communities.

In 2016-17, hospices in Scotland supported 19,000 people of all ages, ranging from newborn babies to centenarians. In the briefing sent round for today’s debate from Together for Short Lives, the UK’s charity for children’s palliative care, there was a request for parity in the contribution to charitable costs by children and adult hospices, and palliative care charities. That is a very reasonable and sensible suggestion, and the Scottish Government have committed to bring about such parity and to fund 50% of the agreed charitable costs of children’s hospices, in line with the adult provision.

During 2016-17, a total of 12,000 people in Scotland received hospice care in their homes. Over the past decade, a significant amount of work and investment has gone in to supporting older people and people with disabilities to live well in their own homes for longer. When hospice care is needed, the Scottish Government have clear standards that meet the needs of patients and respect their rights. And of course Scotland continues to be the only country in the UK that provides free personal care, benefiting over 76,000 older and vulnerable people. In addition, legislation has been approved to extend free personal care to under-65s, which will come into force from April next year.

Much of today’s debate focuses on NHS pay and its impact on the hospice sector. What does it mean for staff in Scotland? Staff on the Agenda for Change scale will benefit from an increase: Such staff include registered nurses, lead nurse managers, ward sisters, clinical nurse managers, clinical nurse specialists, senior nurses and nurse managers. The Scottish National party Government agreed a three-year pay deal linked to reform discussions that are due to be completed by December, meaning that most Agenda for Change staff will make more than their English equivalents.

For adult social care workers, the Scottish Government require all public sector employers to pay at least the Scottish living wage, so health and social care partnerships will have to pay the Scottish living wage, too. I stress that in Scotland we are committed to paying everyone in social care the living wage, and anything additional would be an arrangement agreed between the integration authorities and hospices. Those discussions are ongoing and I look forward to hearing their outcome.

10.13 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I am grateful for the contributions by Members from both sides of the Chamber; they obviously all value the hospices in their constituencies. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for securing this important debate and for outlining so clearly the dilemma facing hospices, citing the example of her own excellent hospice, Springfield. The dilemma is that the delivery of excellent services, by an excellent and qualified workforce, must be balanced against the funding to deliver those services continually.

We are all aware that the NHS is facing massive workforce issues and that recruitment of skilled people is an issue right across the NHS; there is a shortage of such people. We are also very much aware that if hospices are to compete for staff and to recruit and—crucially—retain staff, they must be able to make this pay award, which is extremely welcome. That is the essence of this debate.

Hon. Members made some really important points about the wider issues of funding, which are important, and about the lack of funding. I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for sharing a very personal family experience from his local hospice and for making the important point that hospices allow people to live and die well, which is absolutely crucial.

It is important to set this debate, which is essentially about funding, in a wider context, looking in the first instance at the vast array of services provided by hospices. The majority of hospices are charitable organisations, and provide absolutely tremendous support to the NHS but are not directly part of it. There are in the region of 3,000 in-patient hospice beds in the UK, where patients are helped to manage pain and other symptoms. Hospices also provide respite for carers; it is important not to overlook that.

However, hospices offer far more than an in-patient bed for those reaching the end of their life. In fact, the majority of hospice care is provided in people’s own homes. Hospice UK reports that, in 2016, 51,000 people accessed in-patient hospice care, while 179,000 people received the support of trained hospice staff at home. Many hospices also offer daycare, which gives people the chance to spend time in a hospice and use the majority of the services it offers, while still living at home. In 2017, 37,000 people used day hospice services.

The majority of hospices also offer bereavement counselling. Hospices help to mitigate negative outcomes of loss, helping people to manage what can be a hugely painful and isolating experience. One gentleman in my constituency told me that he did not know how he and his daughters would have coped without the excellent Pendleside Hospice when he lost his wife, and his daughters lost their mother.

It is clear that our hospices are doing a fantastic job supporting people when they need it most. It is difficult to measure the level of demand, but it is a fact that, in 2016, 597,000 people died in the UK, and Hospice UK estimates that 450,000 of them could potentially have benefited from hospice services. It is also clear that there is much unmet demand and that provision varies widely from town to town. Given the changing demographics, though, it is very likely that demand for hospice services will continue to rise.

Consequently, it is imperative that, at the very least, we protect the provision that already exists. As I have said, the majority of hospice services are provided by charitable hospices, which rely on donations from, and fundraising in, their local community to meet the majority of their costs. It is a fact that hospices have a combined revenue of £1.4 billion, and yet the NHS pays only £350 million towards hospices. The average NHS contribution to hospices equates to 30%, and that proportion is falling because there has not been an uplift in funding to hospices for many years. Ten years ago, my own hospice received 32% of its funding from the NHS. That has now fallen to 22%, and in common
Hospice Funding and the NHS Pay Award

with other charitable hospices it is reliant on the generosity of local people and businesses. Each year, hospices must raise millions of pounds to run their services and pay their staff.

I will briefly mention children's hospices. Last week, I met staff from Derian House, and I was shocked to learn that although this excellent hospice supports children and young people from 38 constituencies, only 10% of its funding comes from the NHS. There are 49,000 babies, children and young people in the UK with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions. That number is growing as a result of advances in medical technology, and it is vital that these children and their families have access to palliative care that meets their needs.

Austerity has made fundraising more challenging, as many new and worthy charities now compete for funds. It is a fact that in this economic environment the financial stability and sustainability of many hospices is at risk, and implementing the NHS pay award will add to the financial pressures they face. It is unthinkable that, in the face of increasing demand, they may be forced to reduce services or even close.

At this point, I want to join colleagues in paying tribute to the dedicated staff who are the lifeblood of our hospices. The majority of charitable hospices, although outside the NHS Agenda for Change, attempt to match NHS pay and conditions, ensuring that staff who do that amazing work are properly remunerated. It is essential that those hospices are able to match NHS levels of pay if they are to continue to recruit and retain the staff they need.

I welcome the recently negotiated NHS pay award. That award, which has been hard won and is long overdue, will be hugely welcomed by clinical and non-clinical staff throughout the NHS. Crucially, though, it will not be funded for the charitable sector, and hospices will need to raise additional funds. Coming on top of existing funding pressures, that is going to push our hospices to breaking point. Pendleside Hospice, which serves my constituency, will need to raise an additional £500,000 to fully fund that award. I am sure that the Department of Health and Social Care did not intend to disadvantage hospices in this way, and that this was an unintended consequence. I hope that, in the first instance, the Minister will take the opportunity to announce that the Government will fund the staff pay award in all hospices.

In conclusion, I hope that the Minister will go further to ensure that NHS England resumes its work on developing a specialist palliative care currency, to inform future CCG commissioning of hospice care. It is an inescapable fact that a mechanism to increase the proportion of NHS funding paid to hospices is urgently needed. In a world without hospices, that clinical care would have to be entirely provided directly by the NHS, and would add significantly to NHS costs.

10.21 am

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): As ever, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I add my voice to those congratulating the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) on securing a debate on this important matter, and congratulate every Member who has been involved, either through a speech or an intervention. As MPs, we are all aware of the crucial role that hospices play in supporting and caring for our communities at a time of great need. I understand the concerns that have been raised, and have listened carefully to the strong arguments that have been made.

Hospices across England are delivering excellent end of life care and contributing to their local communities, as they have for many years. The Care Quality Commission’s “State of Care” report, published on 10 October, is testament to that. That report showed that hospices have continued to provide high-quality care at the end of people’s lives, even improving on their performance last year, which saw them rated as the highest performing secondary care servicer, with 27% of hospices—more than a quarter—rated as outstanding. I know that Springhill Hospice in the constituency of the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton was rated as good overall in the CQC’s most recent assessment, but was rated as outstanding in the delivery of care and effective services, and people spoke highly of the kindness and caring attitude of staff. That is why the hon. Lady is right to raise this debate. I add my thanks to all those working and volunteering in the hon. Lady’s hospice, and in hospices up and down the country, for the quality of care that they offer.

We all know that palliative care can take many forms, whether at home, in a hospice, or in a hospital. There is never a more important time to make sure people get the right level of care. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke about the immeasurable support that was given to his mum by his local hospice, and he rightly mentioned the crucial role of local commissioners in ensuring that hospices can do their amazing work, which I will speak more about in a moment. My mum was responsible for fundraising to build the Naomi House children’s hospice that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) mentioned earlier.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the Minister address the question that was raised about local deals, and will she acknowledge the bid that I made?

Caroline Dinenage: Sadly, I cannot comment on individual cases. I am not aware of any individual deals being done with the Government, but of course, this could be a local arrangement. For 2019-20 and the remaining two years of the deal, funding will follow the usual route. It goes through CCGs, so I imagine that the instance that the hon. Lady mentioned is due to that, but I am keen to hear more.

Liz McInnes: Maybe the Minister would like to take the issue up with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has informed me of an agreement that has been made in Plymouth regarding a social enterprise, with the support of the trade unions. That is an interesting example that we potentially should extend to the whole country.

Caroline Dinenage: I can only applaud the hon. Lady’s tenacity in continuing to make that case, and we will certainly look into the matter. As I say, I have no knowledge of that individual case, but I share the desire of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West to ensure that hospices such as Naomi House and Jacksplace have the funding that is necessary to do their
incredible work. My mum got the whole family involved in all manner of quite humiliating fundraising exercises back in the 1990s to build Naomi House children's hospice, and I was delighted that my role as Minister took me back to Naomi House and, indeed, Jacksplace, which caters for young adults. I went there over the summer, and Mark Smith, its director of care, was kind enough to give me a tour of the facilities. We discussed some of the issues that have been raised today, as well as others, and my team has been looking carefully at what more we can do about some of those issues.

Since I was appointed Minister for Care in January, I have met with a range of charitable stakeholders from the end of life and palliative care sector, as well as the national clinical director for end of life care, Professor Bee Wee, who is quite incredible. Having met both system representatives and representatives of charities, I have been impressed by not only their incredible passion and commitment to see Government aims for end of life care delivered, but the shared consensus on what changes are needed to drive through the improvements that we would all like to see. Hospices are an incredibly important feature of end of life care provision, but we have to see them in the wider context of our ambitions in that area. In 2016, the Government published our end of life care choice commitment, which encompasses the whole system approach to transforming end of life care, placing patients and their choices, needs and preferences at the heart of planning. The NHS gets it right when choice is meaningful, personalised, and matched by healthcare services that can respond in an effective way that places patients, families and carers at the centre of the decision-making process. I know that parts of the country are delivering excellent palliative and end of life care for both adults and children.

Thelma Walker: The Minister’s reference to “parts of the country” is of concern to me. Does she agree that the amount of funding, and the capacity for particular communities to raise that funding, is still a postcode lottery? In more deprived areas, accessing the knowledge, skills and ability to raise that funding is more of a challenge. How would the Minister suggest that we create more equity and parity?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. She is right: there are services up and down the country delivering first-class care, but there are also areas where we know we need to do more. NHS England is firmly focused on providing both the support and the challenge to achieve that, and the hon. Lady is right to mention the incredible efforts of the imaginative and resourceful volunteers who do incredible work to raise much-needed funds for those vital hospices.

A key objective in delivering our commitment to strengthening the provision of end of life services out of hospital and in the community is that people should have that level of choice, and a quality choice, up and down the country. Work is ongoing nationally to provide sustainability and transformation partnerships with tailored information to assess and enhance end of life care services in their areas. We talked earlier about commissioning: NHS England has commissioned Hospice UK to undertake an evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of hospice-led interventions in the community. Historically, hospices have struggled to demonstrate strong evidence of the services they provide and the fabulous care that we all know they offer.

The hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned currency. NHS England is working to support local use of the specialist palliative care currency, which can help local areas to plan and deliver services, including hospice services. The currency can help local services better understand the complexity of palliative care and the investment needed to deliver it properly. It is also essential that we can assess how effectively commissioners are working to improve end of life care services. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives hit the nail on the head when he spoke about that. This year we have a new indicator in place designed to help measure how well patients needing end of life care are supported in the community. Going forward, we are planning to do more work to develop indicators that will enable NHS England to further scrutinise the effectiveness of local health economies in delivering choice in end of life care and securing the progress we all want to see.

Julie Cooper: Can the Minister give some idea of the timescales? The point has been made that not only are these organisations at risk of closing, but the people who need the care have not got time. Timescales that indicate the urgency with which the Government are treating the matter would be welcome.

Caroline Dinenage: That is a very good point. NHS England will bring forward its report on hospice care very shortly, in November.

I want to talk about staff funding. In common with much of the sector, I know hospices have faced financial challenges. I recognise the concerns of hospices that the recently announced NHS pay rise is putting them under pressure to match the uplift awarded to staff employed on the Agenda for Change contract not only to retain the incredible staff they already have, but to attract the staff they need. We have agreed that for 2018-19, non-NHS organisations that employ existing and new staff on the Agenda for Change contract will be eligible to receive additional funding. Most hospices do not employ their staff on the Agenda for Change contract because of the cost that would entail and so are ineligible.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is it possible for a hospice to employ some staff on those contracts and then achieve the benefit of doing so without handing over its entire employment budget and losing control over it?

Caroline Dinenage: That is a very good question, which I will drop my right hon. Friend a note to answer, if he does not mind, as we need to make a few more inquiries about that.

It is important to stress that the Agenda for Change pay deal does not seek to make any distinction between the value we place on staff working in NHS and non-NHS organisations. Staff work incredibly hard to provide services, always putting patients and service users first. Funding is linked to the direct costs of implementing the Agenda for Change pay deal, which includes both pay and non-pay reforms. As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton mentioned, it is not just about headline pay. It is right that those organisations that
employ existing and new staff on the Agenda for Change contract and must implement the entire pay deal should receive additional funding for 2018-19.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the matter, and I thank her again for doing so. I have listened carefully to the issues that have been raised, and we will look again at all of them and what we can do to better support our hospices to continue doing their vital work.

10.33 am

Liz McInnes: I thank everyone who has contributed, and I thank the Minister for her response, but I am disappointed that there was no commitment to provide funding for hospices to afford this pay award. The case has clearly been made on the disastrous effects of not funding the pay award. I had hoped that the Minister might have been able to commit to more than a report that is coming out in November.

We need to deal with the issue as a matter of urgency. I suggest the Minister looks at equivalence and whether appraisals, staff health and wellbeing and the systems that hospices already operate can be classed as equivalent to the agreement set out under Agenda for Change. That would help get over the hurdle of the productivity demands that the Chancellor has made.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered hospice funding and the NHS pay award.

10.34 am

Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: Timber Industry

11 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on the timber industry of the UK leaving the EU.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies; I thank you and the Minister for being in your places today. I welcome hon. Members and guests from across the timber industry, who are eagerly anticipating the Government’s response on how the industry will be affected by the terms of our withdrawal from Europe. It is also good to have Hansard here so that we do not have to face the age-old philosophical question: if no one is there to listen to a debate on tree-felling, does it actually take place? Perhaps today we will see through the wood and hunt out some of the trees of questions that are outstanding. Let me put it on the record that, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the timber industries, I shall raise a number of concerns from those who come to our meetings to discuss the problems they face.

Our debate is about the industry and the terms of withdrawal. I wish to focus on three distinct root and branch problems, of which the first is our crashing out of the customs union and single market. I will discuss the real-terms consequences of the Chequers plan for the strategy for the future of house building, for the tax bombshell that could hit the industry after March 2019, and for the importance of upholding regulatory standards when importing and exporting goods after we leave.

The timber industry is very diverse. In Scotland, we have Scotframe, which produces timber-frame house kits from trees grown in the United Kingdom from UK seedlings. It also takes wood from across Europe to manufacture the kits that it sends out to be constructed on sites across the UK.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Although 92% of large contractors would support an industry-wide commitment to using more home-grown timber, the UK remains one of the world’s biggest timber importers. Some companies unnecessarily specify grades of timber that are more common abroad, when home-grown alternatives would work perfectly well. Does he agree that we should work to facilitate a stronger domestic market for timber post Brexit?

Martin Whitfield: This is certainly an opportunity for the industry to review itself. It is important to note that the timber industry is neither for nor against Brexit. What it seeks is clarity and a way of moving forward, both through increased home-grown production and through facilitating the import and export of wood, which will continue to be a requirement. Interestingly, in 2016 we were the second largest net importer of wood products; only China has a higher net import ratio. We rely heavily on wood and timber from across the EU and from across the world.

This debate takes place under exceptional circumstances. On 29 March, we will leave the European Union. We have had almost two years of negotiations with the EU about the terms of our withdrawal. Admittedly, we are not quite 95% of the way through this period, but the
gap for the Prime Minister to secure a workable deal with Europe is closing. The protracted negotiation period has left several key industries, including timber, in the lurch—or out on a branch—over the impact of Brexit.

The sector contributes more than £10 billion a year to the UK economy and has a workforce of more than 200,000. There are profound questions about the nature of our withdrawal and its impact, particularly on the small and medium-sized businesses that make up a substantial part of the industry. As well as being of great national worth, the timber industry supports jobs in my constituency, which has BSW Timber, Windymains Timber and Alba Trees. In East Lothian, we take the acorn to the oak and then cut it up for the use of others.

I am here to express the industry’s concerns about the terms of our withdrawal from Europe and to make a personal case for continued membership of the customs union and the single market after we leave. The technicalities of our withdrawal can appear confusing, but the way in which timber currently enters the UK market from Europe is remarkably simple and has been developed through work across the EU—within the timber industry as much as by the Government. When timber enters the UK from the EU, it clears the ports immediately, with no need for customs checks to be carried out. The materials are then instantly available to be used or sold.

Leaving the customs union threatens the efficiency and simplicity of our current arrangements. The real-terms impact of a poor deal or no deal would mean timber arriving in Britain from Europe and sitting in customs for weeks on end. Indeed, the timber industry in the Republic of Ireland is so concerned about that possibility that it has written to its members with advice on it. This is the reality for companies importing timber from outwith the EU, particularly from North America, and it gives a worrying glimpse of the potential post-Brexit future that our timber industry faces. The time that it will take for businesses, most often small and medium-sized enterprises, to not only get hold of timber but store it before selling is of great concern.

I feel I might be wasting the Minister’s time if I asked for his support for a deal to keep us in both the customs union and the single market, so I will be a little more generous with my two questions. Will the Government commit to ensuring that, after we leave the EU, timber imports will continue to clear customs in the same manner? Will they assure the industry that there will be no up-front costs after we leave the EU, particularly for SMEs that trade with EU countries?

Let me turn to the house building strategy. The timber industry provides the frames and parts for virtually all our houses. In East Lothian, there is a commitment to 10,000 new homes in the near future, and the requirement for wood frames for roofing and joists will be exceptional. Our future relationship with the EU will go hand in hand with our current house building strategy, so I want to explore the impact of our withdrawal on the construction of new homes.

We have an unprecedented housing crisis across the UK, and nowhere more so than in Scotland. I accept that, in my constituency, the responsibility for increasing home ownership and eradicating homelessness rests with the Scottish Government, but the desire to achieve those ends is felt across the whole United Kingdom. At least 150,000 households are on waiting lists for homes in Scotland, while just a quarter of people under the age of 34 own their own home, which is down from just under half in 1999. This is a challenge that the Scottish Government are failing to meet.

These simple figures foreshadow an impending crisis in the supply of raw materials, notably timber, after we leave the EU. Some 60% of wood imports come from Europe, but for the timber that we need to manufacture homes, the figure stands at 90%. It is simply not feasible for the UK to become self-sufficient in timber production by next year or even by the end of any transition period that has been discussed. Of course, a move to greater self-sufficiency would be admirable, but there are questions about climate and about the quality of wood grown for purposes ranging from pulping to open joists in houses.

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**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I do not share his concerns about Britain leaving the EU; I feel that the forestry sector, the timber sector and indeed all sectors will have a very good future after we leave in March. However, does he agree that, although trees planted today will not be ready for next year, the British Government are woefully behind on the tree-planting targets that we need for future years? Forestry and timber is an ongoing industry, not something that will stop tomorrow.

**Martin Whitfield:** The hon. Gentleman is right. If we look back to the planting of the great forest, done all those decades—nay, centuries, ago—with the intention of providing this country with the raw materials it was perceived it needed at the time, and we look at the, frankly, very poor forestry planting record of the recent past, we can see that we are in a desperate situation that needs to be addressed. The tree nurseries in East Lothian grow their plants for about 18 months, until they are large enough to plant out without too much protection. We are then still looking at 20 years before there is usable wood. It would need 60 years for that wood to be of use in house building and for ornate furnishings. What we choose to do today will not be of any benefit to us, but will be of benefit to our children and grandchildren—to those who come after us. It is that foresight that is needed by Governments and politicians, in order to make the correct decisions.

**Chris Davies:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that commercial forestry—the planting of softwoods—should not be seen as a crime in the countryside? The industries that we are talking about rely on softwoods, not necessarily hardwoods, which would not mature for 100 years.

**Martin Whitfield:** Absolutely. A diversity in timber planting is essential for the surrounding ecology and for the intended subsequent use of the trees. What is needed is a diverse plan that recognises the differences that are needed in the future. I commend the ambitions north or south of the border on revitalising house building in Britain, but any housing strategy must factor the strength of timber imports into that.

I turn to what is called “the tax and revenue bombshell” in the timber industry. There is a long-term vision for house building, which is vulnerable to any flawed Brexit
deal that the Prime Minister may come back with. The current VAT payment system that timber companies are signatories to when importing from Europe is critical for the cash flow of small and medium-sized businesses. The system allows companies to spread the payment of VAT on EU imports, so that goods are sold before they have to pay. In the August no deal papers, that issue was recognised and confidence was given to the timber industry that, in the appalling situation of a no deal Brexit, they would be in a better position with regard to VAT than potentially under any deal.

The Timber Trade Federation is clear that the impact of the VAT bill would fall directly on to small business owners, operating on tight margins, who are the most vulnerable to this change. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will ensure that the existing VAT payments system for imports from the EU will remain in place in case of a deal? Alternatively, will the Government commit to establishing a new system that maintains the same benefits?

The immediate impact to consumers of the scheme collapsing would be massive additional costs on building materials, leading to increased costs for basic building work. Piling more money on the base cost of building new homes will continue to prohibit the importing and use of harvested timber from outwith the EU, and that the Government will ensure that the existing VAT payments system for imports from the EU will remain in place in case of a deal? Alternatively, will the Government commit to establishing a new system that maintains the same benefits?

I turn finally to standards. Any industry of this size, which operates with trade heading in either direction, requires a regulatory environment that is fit for purpose—an environment that is strong but that is also standardised. Membership of the EU has created a standardised model that has effectively reduced individual national standards within Europe from 160,000 in 1980 to 20,000 today. That simplification has acted as a passport to trade and minimises the financial barriers that imported goods face. Crucially, standards exist not just to benefit those sitting in boardrooms, but to provide a firewall for consumers across the country. They build consumer trust and they ensure customer safety. One sector-specific issue within the timber industry is the assurance that products are both sustainable and secure.

Leaving Europe will limit our influence over the standards. Does the Minister agree that we should continue to prohibit the importing and use of illegally harvested timber from outwith the EU, and that we should retain the assurance and ensure that our current consistent and simplified approach to EU regulation will continue after March 2019?

There are a number of exciting opportunities present within the timber industry. It is a sector that is spread across every constituency. It provides jobs and investment. It provides training in serious skills shortages in the UK economy. Steps are being taken to seek apprenticeships that will take people from the very start of planting all the way through to the building site to see how the wooden frames are turned into houses, and to the housing factories, where ready-made houses are produced to be assembled on site. That is a massive commitment from the timber industry; it realises that the commitment to future skills is crucial in order for it to maximise opportunities. It would like the same enthusiasm, excitement and out-of-the-box thinking from the Government, to ensure that this industry can continue.

A reckless Brexit deal could affect up to 10 million cubic metres of timber, which we import every year. I hope the Minister agrees that, if the Prime Minister is serious about her personal mission to solve the housing crisis, she must start by scrapping the Chequers deal and broker an improved deal that ensures the timber industry can clear customs freely, considers the VAT question and addresses the question of the house building strategy, so that this hugely important UK industry can be at the root, trunk and branch of our future.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): As always, it is an honour to participate in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr. Davies, and I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing it. Continuing the wood gags, I was concerned at the start of the debate that I would be stumped by his line of questioning, but he has been very clear, for which I am grateful.

Forestry and timber processing is a growth sector, as the hon. Gentleman said, with 82,000 jobs in the UK, and it contributes £2 billion each year to the economy. In the Budget this week, it was good to see the Chancellor announce £60 million to plant trees, including £10 million to do so in urban areas and £50 million to encourage large-scale afforestation through the woodland carbon guarantee. It is important to discuss the impact of the UK’s departure from the EU on this sector and I welcome the opportunity to do so in this debate.

Like all Departments, DEFRA is working incredibly hard to understand the implications of exiting from the EU. We have been taking note of the potential risks, coming up with mitigating actions and looking at what the opportunities will be, in this and other sectors, as well as ensuring that contingency planning is in place, regardless of what scenario we might move into.

Strengthening the timber trade, and enhancing the sustainable management of the woodlands and forests that support the trade, will continue to be a real priority for DEFRA. In the 25-year environment plan, we committed to increase forest cover in England from 10% of land area now to 12% by 2060. That is an area equivalent to the size of Dorset. I know that that is not north of the border, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is big area. Meeting that target will require increases in both private and publicly funded planting, including from the timber industry. That will be music to the ears of my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). Clear opportunities for the sector lie ahead as well.

This is a growth sector, and the value of our forests is on the increase. Market conditions are good and British wood is competitive with imports, leading to increased levels of domestic production, which we need to start thinking about and preparing for. UK mills produce around 3.5 million cubic metres of sawn wood each year. The increase in house building is increasing demand for wood, and 27% of housing starts in 2017 are expected to use timber frames. That is a good opportunity, and we want to be ready to support it through increased domestic production.

At a UK level, timber availability is forecast to increase in the short to medium term and then decline to current levels after 2030. We are gearing up and moving forward. We recognise that increasing domestic production will also boost the rural economy, which many of us represent.
Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), is here. Does the Minister feel that more credit should have been given to the timber industry in the Agriculture Bill, which is currently passing through the House?

David Rutley: That is a good question, and I will come on to it—we will not duck it.

As the hon. Member for East Lothian said, we are the second-largest importer of timber behind China—82% of our wood production uses imported wood. Increased import costs caused by currency fluctuation or regulatory barriers could therefore pose a challenge to the timber trade, but there is capacity in the UK to increase our use of our own forestry resource. There is a real opportunity for import substitution, which over time will help to mitigate any rise in import costs or increase in tariff barriers and will help bring more of the UK’s woodlands under active, sustainable management. That is something we all want to see.

Chris Davies: Will the Minister tell us what schemes will be put in place to ensure that native woodlands are managed properly and that that timber goes into the firewood sector, while commercial soft wood is targeted at the building sector?

David Rutley: We have a number of schemes in place, and the Agriculture Bill will introduce environmental land management systems, which will help us to promote the production of different wood types. I can meet my hon. Friend after the debate to discuss that question in more detail.

There are clear opportunities ahead, which are good commercially and make sense, given our wider ambition to increase woodland coverage and meet our carbon targets. The hon. Member for East Lothian mentioned Scotframe. The issues he raised are matters for the Scottish Government, but I am keen to discuss new timber-based construction with business, and the 25-year environment plan commitment to use more domestic timber in construction points to where we want to go. Using our timber in construction will help us create what some people call a conveyor belt of carbon sequestration here at home, helping us to meet not only our long-term objectives under the Paris agreement but our primary aim is to secure a deal. In our planning for the unlikely scenario of a no deal, we are working to ensure that timber importers face as little inconvenience and as few additional costs as possible in the event that they need to conduct extra due diligence at the borders. Current due diligence checks on imports from outside the EU will remain the same, so in a no-deal scenario a large number of importers will not notice any increased costs. Although we recognise there will be some additional costs for businesses that import from EU countries—I will talk more about that in a minute—we will give them support and advice to ensure the costs are minimised as far as possible. A number of technical notices have been published in the public domain to provide such information, reduce the grey areas that businesses are working with, and give them greater clarity.

Martin Whitfield: Does the Minister accept that the paperwork relating to imports and exports from within the EU far exceeds the paperwork relating to imports and exports from outside the EU, and that that become necessary following our departure?

David Rutley: As I was trying to explain, our aim is to ensure any added burden is kept to a minimum. The technical notices help to set that out, but there is clearly more work to do.

We want to ensure businesses can continue to trade with the EU in a no-deal scenario, which is why the Office for Product Safety and Standards will support and advise UK exporters about what documentation they might need to give EU customers so they can fulfil their due diligence requirements. We are working hard to ensure that the supply of timber for building is not interrupted—I know that is a priority for the hon. Gentleman—and we will work with those who face any additional costs or burdens to ensure these are minimised. We are also making good progress in driving up planting rates across the country so we have a resilient timber supply for the future. We are on track to meet our commitment to plant 11 million trees by 2022 and an additional 1 million trees in our towns and cities.

As part of our planning, we are working to ensure that biosecurity standards continue to be met in ways that support trade and the smooth flow of goods. Our plant health biosecurity arrangements protect the environment from pests and diseases, and we will continue to protect the nation’s plant health biosecurity during and after our exit from the EU. That is a clear priority.

We are considering our import controls for plants and their products, including timber and forestry material, for a range of scenarios. The Government are working to ensure that systems and processes are in place so that trade continues to flow after exit.

We have set out our technical notices, including one entitled “Importing and exporting plants and plant products if there’s no Brexit deal”. Timber currently managed under the EU plant passport regime will need to enter the UK with a phytosanitary certificate in a no-deal scenario. Checks will take place remotely after the border to minimise impacts on businesses and ensure the continued smooth flow of goods.
The hon. Gentleman talked about the number and weight of regulations. Our aim is to ensure that, although we will have to adjust to any eventuality, the burden is kept to a minimum.

Martin Whitfield: May I extend to the shadow Minister and the Minister an invitation to meet the APPG and its members so we can take these discussions further?

David Rutley: I welcome that opportunity. It would be good to meet the APPG and Confor, which provides its secretariat services, to discuss these issues in more detail. I am a new Minister in this area, and it would be a pleasure to do that.

Chris Davies: As chairman of the APPG on forestry, may I ask whether we could have a joint meeting with the Minister?

David Rutley: My goodness—that sounds like an incredibly good idea. Joined-up thinking! I like the sound of that. I will gladly arrange that meeting.

The hon. Member for East Lothian talked about illegally harvested timber. We will ensure that there is a successor arrangement in a no-deal scenario, and are creating a UK forest law enforcement, governance and trade system.

I think all hon. Members recognise that UK forestry and timber processing is a growth sector, and that the value of our forests is on the increase—not just commercially, but in terms of natural capital. Market conditions are good, which gives us the opportunity to increase British wood production. Although the UK’s exit from the EU may pose challenges for the forestry and timber-processing industries, we are working flat out to ensure that those issues are mitigated. We want to create more opportunities for the production of domestic timber. That will fit neatly with the commercial opportunities and what we are trying to do with our 25-year environment plan and our clean growth strategy. I know that is important to the hon. Gentleman and to others who participated in the debate. I thank him for securing this important debate, and I assure him that achieving those objectives is very important to me in my new ministerial role.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am
Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: Aviation Sector

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on the aviation sector of the UK leaving the EU.

It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The focus of today’s debate is the aviation sector and the risks and opportunities that will be presented when we leave the EU. Aviation and the international connectivity it provides are one of the key drivers of trade, exports and tourism, bringing economic growth and prosperity to the UK.

To many people, an airport is a place they pass through on their way to and from a summer holiday, and an aircraft is simply a thing they board to go on a weekend away or a business trip. However, like many Members here today with airports in and around their constituencies, I know that aviation is about a lot more than that. It is a large, technical and complex industry, and the ease and regularity with which we use it often hides the expertise and investments that go into making it so safe, simple and affordable for all our constituents.

In my own constituency, the sector is a vital source of employment, with more than 25,000 jobs directly supported on the Manchester airport campus. Hundreds of businesses outside the airport work to supply it, sustaining thousands more jobs. Those benefits come from just one airport, and there are many more like it across the country. Imagine the headlines that would follow if a new business was brought to the UK with the promise of creating 25,000 jobs. Imagine the crisis headlines we would read if even a fraction of employment on that scale was suddenly lost.

Aviation is a key enabler of overseas trade. As an island nation, we rely on flight connectivity more than most as we strive to get British products on the shelves of markets around the world, or foreign goods on ours. In addition, as an economy with such a prominent services sector, being able to move British expertise around the world plays a major role in our overseas trade, and that role will only continue to grow.

It is well known that we as a nation need to export more and to ensure that British businesses are competing effectively on the world stage. It is clear that, for those businesses that export, travel and trade abroad, their international exploits are made a lot easier when they have access to direct air links to their chosen markets. Growing our access to those markets will be even more important after Brexit, as will ensuring that they can access the UK market. I am very proud to represent an airport that has the most point-to-point connections of any airport in the UK.

Tourists from all corners of the world flock to the UK to sample our countryside, our history and our cultural, sporting and other assets. In Manchester alone we are surrounded by the Peak district and the Lake district. We have the world’s most famous and successful football teams—some of my hon. Friends here today might argue about which is the most successful of the
two. Manchester has an international cricket ground, fantastic universities and even the British Broadcasting Corporation.

As Britain leaves the EU, we need people from right across the globe to find it quick and easy to visit the UK to support our tourist economy. I am sure that colleagues from all parties in this House, regardless of their political background and how they voted in the EU referendum, would agree that it is critical that we continue to enjoy those benefits and that the choice available to our constituents today remains the same. That is critical to those who rely on tourism as their source of income, and it is critical to the businesses that the Government want to support—those that export and trade with the world.

I want to outline both the risks and the opportunities for the aviation sector as we edge closer to the EU exit door. The most fundamental of those is maintaining the connections that are utilised so much today. Some 74% of flights from Manchester airport go to other EU nations. The EU remains our biggest export market and the place where most Britons travel on holiday, with about two thirds of overseas holidaymakers going to Europe every year. It is clear that we have a mutual interest with the EU in a deal being done so that the doomsday scenario of planes being grounded on 29 March next year does not play out. I ask the Minister whether he can provide reassurance that aviation remains at the top of the list as negotiations continue, and that it will be prioritised quickly should no deal become a reality.

Lucy Chadwick, the director general of the Department for Transport, recently said to the Public Accounts Committee that air and rail services between Britain and the EU are an “area of growing concern.” The House of Lords EU Committee reported last year:

“There is no adequate ‘fall-back’ position for aviation services in the event that no agreement is reached with the EU. Air services are excluded from the WTO.”

That is worth repeating: there is no World Trade Organisation fall-back position for aviation when we exit the EU next year. Although airlines and airports are optimistic that a deal will be negotiated, there is a very real danger that planes will be unable to take off if we leave the EU without a deal. Can the Minister comment on that and, furthermore, describe the practical steps the Government are taking to secure the mutual recognition of aviation safety standards, which is currently provided for under the European Aviation Safety Agency system? This must be about not mitigating any risk to aviation, but actively supporting it after Brexit.

The opportunity is there for us to pull the levers we need to to further improve our links with the rest of the world and to edge ahead of our competitors. We have the chance now to think about the markets we want to access if we are serious about Britain competing on the world stage after Brexit. There is no better time to consider the kind of aviation sector we want and the role we want it to play in driving growth and prosperity, particularly in our regions. It is clear that those benefits need to be spread across the whole of the UK—not only by allowing people in the north to fly south, but by allowing people from all over our country to fly wherever they need to. That strategy goes hand in hand with defining what a post-Brexit Britain will look like.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about Brexit allowing a reorientation so that we can look at where else in the world UK airlines can fly to. Can he explain why we cannot do that now, and why we need to lose our flights to Europe to gain flights to elsewhere?

Mike Kane: We are doing that now at my own airport. I will be going to the inaugural flight from Manchester to Mumbai next week. We now have direct connectivity to Beijing and Hong Kong, and shortly we will announce direct connectivity to Shanghai as well. Airports are increasingly going from point to point, and that seems to be the way of the future.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I wanted to come in at that point, because my hon. Friend is talking specifically about those connections between Manchester airport and China. I want to touch on air freight, because Manchester has seen a £300 million increase in air freight exports to China in the last two years. To have that thriving air freight sector requires further work to be done. Does he agree that the UK needs to be doing better, given that we are outside the top 10 on the air trade facilitation index and outside the top 20 for electronic freight processing?

Mike Kane: The Manchester Airports Group includes East Midlands airport, which is close to my hon. Friend’s constituency, and Stansted. East Midlands is a huge hub for freight leaving the UK, and has huge expansion potential. I am concerned that the Government are not ready to use the opportunity, as we leave the EU, to prepare the aviation sector for the next, crucial five to 10 years.

The welcome that we give to those who visit us is also part and parcel of creating a truly international Britain after Brexit. It is how we tell the world that we are open for business and how we encourage tourists to come to see us time and time again.

Lots of questions still need answering, and there is a risk that questions are not being answered in good time. I am sure we were all concerned by the recent National Audit Office report on our state of preparedness for a no-deal scenario. Airports across the country have repeatedly reported problems of under-resourcing, queues at the border and a total dissatisfaction with the targets that Border Force works to. The Government have continued to cut funding for Border Force, while passenger numbers have grown, so can we really expect a proper service at our borders? I hope the Minister will tell us what the Government are doing to work with airports and Border Force to put in place a realistic, long-term plan to ensure our borders are adequately resourced into the future.

Finally, as I said, the aviation sector is a huge employer in its own right, and millions more are employed in related industries, such as the visitor economy and the logistics sector, which my hon. Friend just mentioned. Across the country, tens of millions of EU nationals make a valuable contribution to those industries. Although I am hopeful that arrangements will be put in place to...
ensure that people can remain employed in those sectors, we need to think seriously about what happens post Brexit. We must ensure we have the skills and training to support and grow the aviation sector in the years ahead. We have the opportunity to get this right through the industrial strategy process to ensure that Britain is known around the globe for delivering world-class service and hospitality, as well as for having a slick, efficient transport system.

As I have outlined, aviation is an essential component of an outward-looking Britain. It must continue to play a pivotal role in our economy and our social and cultural future, but the question is, how will we harness that potential? How will we use the sector to drive growth through enhanced trade and investment in tourism? How, on a more basic level, will we ensure that consumers continue to enjoy the choices they enjoy today? If we are serious about creating a balanced and truly international Britain, we must prioritise this sector now, during and after our exit from the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 4 o’clock, and I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 3.28 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, with Mr Kane having two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Until 3.28 pm, it is Back-Bench time. The first Back-Bench contribution will come from Jim Shannon.

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is not often that I get called first, so I appreciate the opportunity. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) on securing the debate, and I thank him for the cohesive way in which he put forward his point of view. His speech was constructive, and he looked forward with some positivity to our exit from the EU on 29 March next year.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this matter. In my constituency, I have Bombardier, which is involved in the production of planes, and Belfast City airport is not that far away, so domestic connectivity is very important to us. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to air freight. We have some of the largest air freight connections in the domestic market through Belfast International airport. It is surprising how much air freight goes through the airports of the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland in particular.

I hope I will be able to bring a bit more positivity to the debate. Of course, the ongoing Brexit negotiations are complex and difficult, but leaving the EU was never going to be quick and simple. If only that were the case. It will not come as a surprise to hon. Members that I think Brexit is a fantastic opportunity, including for our aviation sector, and I hope to expand on that point of view.

Although hon. Members have different points of view about Brexit, we are united by the need to have a thriving aviation sector in the UK after we leave the EU. I believe that it will thrive. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East put forward that view very eloquently, and I support that.

The UK has the second largest aerospace sector in the world, behind that of the United States, and the largest in Europe. We must not understate the importance of our aviation sector to the EU or the importance of the EU’s sector to the UK. We both need each other. I often say in this House that we are better together. In this case, we are parting, but there is no reason why we should not be able to work together.

It is in both our interests to secure the best deal to allow the liberalisation of air transport to continue. The UK is currently a member of the European common aviation area, which allows registered airlines to have a base in one member state and operate on a cabotage basis—to use the terminology that they use—in other member states. It is an arrangement that works well.

The latest European Council negotiating guidelines aim to maintain connectivity between the UK and the EU through an air transport agreement. The Minister will respond to this debate in some detail, and we look forward to his comments. Naturally, at this stage it is unclear what that agreement might be. It might involve an open skies arrangement like the one the UK currently has with the US, or it might involve negotiating a single bilateral agreement with the EU as a whole, if member states give it a mandate to negotiate on their behalf.

Given the value of the industry to the United Kingdom and the EU, I am confident that we will get a good deal for our aviation sector and for future air travel between the UK and the EU. We need each other to succeed in this sector. London remains the world’s best connected and most attractive destination.

Although it is a while off, and there are hurdles to overcome, the third runway at Heathrow should be an even greater draw to London. It will improve our connectivity across Europe and with the rest of the world. My party and I fully support the third runway at Heathrow, and we would like to see it happen sooner rather than later.

In 2016, the chief executive of the Civil Aviation Authority said that the UK is a key player in aviation, and he was not wrong. We have the third best developed aviation network in the world, just behind the US and China. The figures show why the UK is such a vital player in the sector. It is not surprising that some airlines are already applying for licences to operate in the UK in the event of no deal. I suggest that that shows the confidence that people outside the United Kingdom have in the UK’s aviation sector. Although I am confident that we will secure a good deal—it has always been my intention that we will, and hopefully the Prime Minister will be successful in that—it is good that airlines are preparing for any eventual. It is also welcome that, despite people’s warnings, airlines have every intention of continuing to fly to and from the UK. Life will not end when we leave the EU on 29 March. Indeed, it will get better. That has got to be good.

As well as liberalisation, we should also consider our membership of the European Aviation Safety Agency, which develops common safety and environmental rules at the European level. The Government have explicitly stated that they want to negotiate some sort of ongoing membership of EASA after Brexit, and there is widespread agreement that continued membership would benefit both the UK and the EU.
Jim Shannon: In a speech in 2016, Andrew Haines highlighted that the UK and France provide two-thirds of the rule-making input on European safety regulation, and that together we undertake close to 90% of EASA’s outsourced activities. Again, that indicates EASA’s importance to the United Kingdom. Mr Haines set out four principles for the UK to consider during the Brexit negotiations. The third principle, which relates to competition, could present a real opportunity for the UK post-Brexit. It relates to airline ownership rules, which are currently very outdated. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that. If the UK relaxed the ownership arrangements that UK-registered airlines currently have to comply with, that could present an opportunity to attract new equity from non-EU investors, which could improve choice and competitiveness for consumers.

Haines also referred to the EU slot regime, which requires that 50% of new slots are allocated to new competitors at a particular airport. I believe, however, that restricting such a large proportion to new entrants has been a barrier to strong competition, and changing our rules could be one advantage of leaving. That shows a lack of future planning from the EU, which could be to our benefit. The UK will have the opportunity to develop a new and more competitive slot regime—there are enormous possibilities.

As negotiations continue, there will be difficulties and we must plan for every eventuality, but it is also important to see the potential opportunities that Brexit could bring to the industry, especially regarding competition, which can drive prices down and keep airfares low. We should also consider the way that the industry has responded to date; according to ADS Group’s 2017 figures, the sector directly employed 120,000 people, with a further 118,000 employed indirectly—enormous employment figures. In 2017, the sector had a turnover of £31.8 billion, which was up 39% in five years. If a sector is growing, and probably outgrowing every other sector, it is the aviation sector of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

While productivity growth in the general economy between 2010 and 2016 was just 3%, it was 19% in the aviation industry. Not only that, but so far, the UK’s decision to leave the EU appears to have had no financial impact on the industry, which is perhaps another positive indication of where we are. In fact, according to ADS Group’s 2017 figures, 73% of companies were planning to increase investment—an indication of their confidence in the future. In Northern Ireland, Bombardier secured a deal in May this year with the Latvian carrier Air Baltic, for up to 60 Belfast-made jets, which is another indication of how well our aviation sector is doing and how it benefits all regions of the United Kingdom.

Of course, airlines are concerned and, given the uncertainty, that is not surprising. It is important to consider the value of the sector to the UK and to the EU; to realise that Brexit can provide positive change and opportunity for the UK; and to realise that little has changed since the referendum. Moreover, aerospace is an important part of the Government’s industrial strategy: a number of initiatives have been set up to boost research and investment, and to guarantee exports. The Aerospace Growth Partnership and the Aerospace Technology Institute have both been set up in recent years as a collaboration between Government and the industry, to build on past success and look forward to the future success.

Lilian Greenwood: Like the hon. Gentleman, I am very concerned about the implications of leaving the European Union for our aerospace sector. The chief executive of Airbus said that there will be “severe negative consequences” to withdrawing from the European Union, and that they will be particularly severe if there is a hard or no-deal Brexit. Does he agree that it is essential that the Government address those issues to protect high-skilled and high-paid engineering jobs in our aerospace industry?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady, but for the record, I do not share her concerns about leaving the EU in relation to the aviation sector. Maybe I did not make that clear enough, so let me make it quite clear: I believe that we should look forward to a very positive future. That has been demonstrated in my own constituency, where Bombardier have secured a fairly substantial and significant contract, and by aviation authorities and the airlines, which have indicated their confidence in the direction of the country over the last five years. It has been a fact that we are going to leave the EU for a year and a half of that time, and that has not slowed the industry. Government’s central theme of support, focus and strategy for the aviation sector indicates to me that good times are just around the corner. Hopefully, after 29 March 2019, the good times will come back, and those who have doubts about that just have to look at how the aviation sector is growing in anticipation. I put on record that I hope that the Prime Minister secures a deal for the UK, but in the event that she does not, the aviation authorities are well aware of their options in that scenario.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I sincerely apologise for being late, Mr Hollobone; I had another meeting. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we can get the Government to look at air passenger duty, we would see a significant change in the aviation industry? In the Republic of Ireland, numbers have soared above 13 million passengers because the air passenger duty has been abolished. If that could be achieved in the UK, we might see even better days within the aviation industry.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for his intervention. I am glad that he has reminded me to mention air passenger duty. We feel that abolishing APD would benefit Northern Ireland, as well the rest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that we would gain from that collectively. In the Republic of Ireland, numbers have soared above 13 million passengers because the air passenger duty has been abolished. If that could be achieved in the UK, we might see even better days within the aviation industry.
what the Minister has to say about that, and I look forward to his comments, as well as those of the shadow Minister.

Given the global nature of the airline industry and the need to be connected to one another, I am confident that a good deal will be secured; one that is in the interests of both the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of the EU. There are many sectors where close co-operation and mutual interest will play a role, but none more so than aviation and aerospace.

At 2.57 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As hon. Members have mentioned, Brexit is five months away, and aviation is not covered by World Trade Organisation rules and is not usually covered in other free trade agreements. The idea that we can replace the European common aviation area easily is not true.

The single aviation market has transformed flight for ordinary punters. Most people in the Chamber will know that my husband is German, and when we first started our four-year long-distance romance, it cost £220 to fly from London to Hanover. Now, people can started our four-year long-distance romance, it cost £20 to fly all over the place, often for less than £50 each way. That is because airlines registered in the EU can fly in both directions and, in particular, in people flying. That is because airlines registered in the EU can fly domestically in another country or between two third countries, which allowed them to drop prices. That is because airlines registered in the EU can fly domestically in another country or between two third countries, which allowed them to drop prices—[Interruption.] I apologise; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is trying to throw me off.

As we know, easyJet has registered in Austria to try to get around the fact that it is a UK airline and might have difficulties flying within Europe's single aviation market. The airline that flies to Glasgow Prestwick—the airport in my constituency—is Ryanair, an Irish-EU airline, and may be forced to consider registering in the UK. The problem is that it would then be a part-UK, part-EU airline. That does not replace what we have at the moment; it avoids triangular flying. Very few routes just shuttle backwards and forwards; often, we hear that the plane we are boarding has just come from somewhere else.

This issue is critical for my local airport. Prestwick is a major airport: we have 50% of the Scottish aerospace industry and a huge cargo industry. Although our passenger numbers have dwindled, they are still a significant proportion of our income. In particular, they represent the main part of Ryanair's flights to the Iberian peninsula. The problem is that in recent years we have had no strategic plan for regional airports across the nations and regions of the UK, and, obviously, we have had air passenger duty. The hon. Member for Strangford talked about competing with the Republic of Ireland where they have not just got rid of air passenger duty but have dropped tourism valued added tax to 9%. If people in Europe or America decide whether they fancy the mountains of Scotland or the mountains of Ireland, unfortunately one is much more expensive than the other.

Things can be done in UK policy to try to support our network of airports, but Brexit clauses are already creeping into airline bookings. Already, tourists are holding off because they are not sure what will happen. The International Air Transport Association said that the Brexit deadline might be next March, but tourists book six months to a year in advance. For airlines the deadline is in October 2018 right now, but they have no idea what the landscape will look like.

My constituency is also a major tourist part of the country, where golf is a significant attraction in beautiful rolling countryside on the west coast of Scotland. We think often about the outward-bound tourists—and that is us when we go on our holidays. Three quarters of visits from the UK are to the EU, and EU passengers make up half of all passengers who fly backwards and forwards. Nine out of 10 of the flight destination top 10 are in the EU, the US being the only non-EU country in the top 10. However, inward-bound tourists are more important because they do not just generate a bit of duty-free and the price of a flight but stay in hotels, eat out and go to pubs and to the theatre. That is a major part of the tourism industry—I use that term advisedly because tourism is often overlooked as an industry, but in the more rural parts of the United Kingdom, tourism often is the main industry. If we are not attracting people because it is harder to get here, flight numbers are decreasing or APD puts people off, that will lead to huge shockwaves right through our local economies.

Another part of the significant work in Prestwick is maintenance, repair and overhaul work. Multiple companies perform that work, including for Ryanair. If Ryanair decides not to fly to Prestwick, we would not only lose that passenger income—Ryanair will not fly there just to get its MRO work done if it no longer brings planes through. It is critical that we stay in the European Aviation Safety Agency, because the companies that carry out MRO work do so under EASA part-145 that allows them to release a plane as safe to fly in the EU. Their engineers are licensed under part-66; they could go off and license themselves in the national aviation agency of another country, but the company cannot do that. We are talking about companies that could do MRO work only for United Kingdom airlines but not for European airlines. That would take away an enormous swathe of MRO work.

We have companies such as Chevron or GTS MRO that are local, home-grown companies in Ayrshire, but we also have major multinationals such as UTC Aerospace Systems, Goodrich Corporation, Woodward, BAE Systems and more. As the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned, they generate high-quality, high-paid engineering jobs—not something that can be easily replaced. We have companies in our aerospace cluster that manufacture parts for planes, such as Spirit AeroSystems, which makes the leading edges for Airbus wings.

If the aviation industry starts to shrink, inevitably that will have a follow-on impact on MRO work and manufacturing work. Those are really good jobs. With the clock ticking down to Brexit, we are already getting past the aviation deadline. It is important that we start to get some vision from the Government of their plan with regard to the EU, the single aviation market and staying in EASA, and of what they plan to do to support airlines in the UK, tourism and our regional airports.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) on this timely
debate. It is only a shame that there are not more Members here to listen to the good contributions being made. Let me put on the record that before being elected, I was proud to work in aviation for ABTA for many years, working with large tour operators, airlines and airports. I am also vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation, which looks after airfields and small airports very proudly.

Brexit is a testing time for all parts of our economy. Whether hon. Members think Brexit is the best thing since sliced bread or a national disaster, we can all agree that the uncertainty created by Brexit is bad for business and bad for our country. For aviation, in particular, uncertainty is eating away at confidence in the investment and business decisions that are vital to its continued success in the UK. In that spirit, I hope my remarks will create some more clarity on Brexit and aviation.

If we are to mitigate the impacts of Brexit—or maximise the opportunities, depending on the side of the debate—we must look at the detail of aviation. How does it work, how are people employed, how are planes maintained—we just heard about that—and flown, and how will business investment continue? That requires an understanding of the detail of international agreements, but that involves a level of detail I have not really seen since I was elected to this place. Parliament is unaccustomed to dealing with that level of detail at scale, so I welcome this debate as a chance to get stuck in.

Sadly, my time with the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on the Transport Committee has just come to an end. When I left, I said I would continue to talk about transport and aviation, and I regard this speech as continuing that promise. It is worth talking about aviation in the UK because it is a global success story. We are really good at it, and we need to maintain that success. We have the largest aviation sector in the EU and the third largest in the world after the United States and China. We have direct connections to more than 370 international destinations, and more than 284 million passengers passed through a UK airport in 2017—a record number. Whether people are flying for business, for leisure or to visit friends and relatives, they all make a contribution to our economy. We must recognise that we get benefit from people not only flying in but flying out.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend made a great contribution to the Transport Committee. He will remember that the Committee was told repeatedly by the Transport Secretary that he is optimistic about a deal with the European Union on air transport. He told Parliament in November 2016 that he was “absolutely in no doubt that we would secure in good time and effectively the agreements that our aviation sector needs”.—[Official Report, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 953.]

We are now five months away from the exit, and we still do not know what it means for our access to the European common aviation area or international agreements such as the open skies to the US; how it will affect our nine freedoms to fly and air traffic control, including our participation in the Single European Sky regime; and whether the UK will remain part of the UK-Ireland functional airspace block. Do those questions not need answering now?

Luke Pollard: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns. We need certainty about what is going on, and we need to ensure that we have the authentic voice of British business. The Government’s use of non-disclosure agreements in some of the discussions taking place between them and industry about certain aspects, especially no-deal preparations, concerns me. We are not getting the clarity that we need from Ministers and, unfortunately, the hands of business have been tied by NDAs, preventing them from exploring how the worst effects of no deal can be dealt with.

I share some of the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East about planes being grounded, but I want to deal with a couple of other aspects of EASA membership. Our debate in Parliament to date has focused on the safety role of EASA, but our participation in EASA is about more than safety certification and standards, although they are important. We also need to deal with pilot registration and engineering standards and qualifications. I want the UK to remain part of EASA. I simply cannot believe that any competent British Government would sanction our departure from that vital body.

The UK’s expertise makes an important contribution to EASA, with 40% of its staff coming from the UK. The UK also participates in nearly every single technical programme to facilitate the movement of both passengers and cargo. In our future relationship with EASA, which I hope is as a full member, we must maintain full participation, especially in EASA’s technical working groups, to get the detail of what is going on. EASA is not a body where we have no influence. Britain’s hard and soft power in EASA is strong. A third of EASA regulations come directly from the UK’s CAA, so we have a strong voice in that body and we need to maintain it.

The issue of CAA pilots’ licences was raised with me by pilots ahead of this debate. Currently, CAA pilots’ licences, gained at considerable cost to the individual, are recognised throughout Europe, and European licences are recognised in the UK. After Brexit, unless a provision can be made, all pilots flying in the UK will need a full CAA UK licence, and not necessarily an EASA one that is recognised in the rest of the EU. At present, pilots are swapping their EASA licences for UK licences to enable them to fly UK planes in UK airspace, but there is a considerable backlog in processing applications. Will the Minister tell us what the current waiting time is for processing the transfers of EASA licences to CAA licences? What plans does he have to reduce that considerable waiting list, and what guidance is given to the CAA on prioritising pilot licences for commercial flyers, perhaps ahead of leisure pilots, who might be less time-dependent? At the moment, they go into a single queue and are not prioritised.

Dr Whitford: I would be grateful for clarification. If pilots are changing their EASA licences for CAA licences, would that not limit their ability to fly within Europe?

Luke Pollard: Indeed. We need to recognise that, and that is why the full participation of the UK in EASA is vital. There is no point having a UK-only licence enabling flights within UK airspace, because the vast majority of flights from UK airports leave UK airspace. We therefore need those licences recognised at the point of destination and at the point of departure as well.
Will the Minister look at what actions can be taken to speed up the processing? Pilots need to carry their licences every time they fly, and when they do not have their licences they are grounded. Delays of six weeks are not uncommon. That is important because groundings of over a month trigger a requirement for additional time in flight simulators to ensure compliance with safety standards, and rightly so. However, that means the flight simulators are not being used for pilot training, and we know that we have a shortage of pilots not only in the UK, but around the world. That puts pressure on UK airlines when ensuring that they have a sufficient number of pilots to fly the aircraft that we need them to.

There are also concerns around engineering licences because EASA looks after the qualifications and certification of engineers as well as pilots. If UK engineers are no longer allowed to work on EU planes, as was hinted at in the technical notices that came out, it is deeply concerning. As we have already heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the UK is a hub for not only aviation but aviation maintenance and support. Those jobs are not done only at London’s big airports; they are done mainly in our regions and nations, bringing much needed high-skilled jobs into those localities. In the far south-west, Flybe has an excellent facility at Exeter airport, providing a good number of decent, well-paid jobs, recruiting from the local area and training people for a career in aviation that will, in theory, do them well. If UK engineers are prohibited from maintaining EU aircraft, how will such jobs be protected in future? A key part of keeping costs down in the UK is bringing foreign planes into UK airports; maintenance costs are subsidised by ensuring that, when there is space in the schedule, foreign planes can be maintained as well. If there is no authorisation to do so because we sit outside EASA, it has serious implications for the future of our industry.

Creating certainty is key, and the upcoming aviation strategy is an opportunity to create that certainty. Far too much of our aviation debate to date has been focused purely on London Heathrow. Although it is a very important airport for not only London but for the rest of the country, including Plymouth, we need to make sure that the future aviation strategy deals with airports big and small, in every region of the country, and creates more certainty. Ministers need to do more than just put out a bold statement. They can do more in several areas to create more certainty. It is about accelerating what, in many cases, the Government have already planned.

The confirmation that Five Eyes countries will be able to use e-gates was a welcome step, but what is not clear is when they will be able to use them. It needs to happen before 29 March next year. Confirmation that that will be brought in ahead of that Brexit departure date and not afterwards is important for airlines and airports.

We need to look again at our funding for the border. The queues are too long. If we are to have a comprehensive and positive welcome to Britain, at a time when there is increased uncertainty not only in the UK but among our international trading partners, we need to make sure that people are not queuing at the border. Additional investment in Border Force, and particularly its staff, is absolutely vital.

We also need Ministers to recognise that the flight is only one part of the customer journey. That is really important. People do not simply magic up at an airport and then disappear when they land. They have a journey to get to an airport, which is why surface connectivity is so vital and needs to be looked at. What are the opportunities that can be maximised by Brexit, and how can the impact be mitigated? Projects have been promised for some time, such as western rail access to Heathrow, and we need to accelerate that programme. Will the Minister set out when the timetable for funding western rail access will be delivered?

We also need the Government to look at regional connectivity to airports. Some have good connectivity in our regions, but others less so. At Exeter, Plymouth’s local airport, we have a bus to the city centre only once every hour, which is not good enough. Supporting regional economies is vital.

The review of APD has already been mentioned. It could be a big boost to the UK economy. We need to bring forward the airspace review that Ministers have been considering for some time. We need certainty about how airspace will operate in future. The creation of flight paths that make it better and easier for airlines to invest in and fly from the UK could bring considerable benefits.

We also need to make sure that aviation is greener. Will the Minister set an objective for the UK to be the greenest and most sustainable aviation market in the world? That means really motoring the work of Sustainable Aviation, the industry-led body, to look at how improvements can be brought in.

Finally, will the Minister look at removing uncertainty by reopening Plymouth airport? This has been absent from most people’s speeches so far, which surprises me. Plymouth airport, which closed in 2010, could make a big contribution to the future economy of my city, and also help provide the certainty for businesses to invest in the region as well. Plymouth airport was not a bucket-and-spade airport; it was an airport built on senior-level connectivity and high-value investors. It provided connectivity for our marine, maritime, oil and gas, and science industries. We need to preserve that. The loss of the airport has been detrimental to Plymouth. There are other forms of connectivity, but the train has to get through Dawlish, and we know that the impact of the hanging bridge, when the line was washed away, affected business confidence in terms of investing in the west country.

In conclusion, the more the Government can bring certainty to the aviation debate around Brexit, the better. In many cases, the tools are already sitting with Ministers. We need to be able to commit to full participation in EASA and to deal with the uncertainty around pilots’ licences and engineers’ certifications. We should also bring forward projects for aviation investment that can make a real difference in making journeys smoother, quicker and greener.

3.19 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I want, like other hon. Members, to congratulate the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) on bringing forward the debate.
The opportunity is timely, given the ticking of the clock towards Brexit day. The hon. Gentleman was right to highlight the aviation industry’s skills and its scale—the fact that it supports thousands of jobs, as well as exports, imports, businesses across the entire UK, and of course inward and outward tourism. He went on to highlight the risks and opportunities, and I found some parts of what he said easier to agree with than others.

Unfortunately I agreed with the negative points, rather than the positive ones. As to risks, the hon. Gentleman was right to highlight the risk to connectivity. There is clearly such a risk, and the UK Government are now beginning to acknowledge that. He highlighted how critical the EU is for Manchester airport’s connectivity, citing the figure of 74% of its flights. With respect to connectivity risks and day-to-day operations, he mentioned evidence to the Public Accounts Committee that air and rail services between Britain and the EU are an “area of growing concern.” That point was recently echoed by Michael O’Leary of Ryanair, who last month stated industry concerns about the implications of no deal, and the lack of preparation for that. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the hon. Gentleman was correct that the WTO is not an option; that is not an alternative that is compliant with the aviation sector. The UK Government need to get their act together.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Department for Transport has been telling the aviation industry since the Brexit vote that it will be all right on the night? I warned the Airport Operators Association and others that, while that might be the case, there was no justification for that confidence. Does my hon. Friend agree with the EASA and Civil Aviation Authority employees I spoke to a few months ago, who think that there is a huge risk that the UK Government are sleepwalking into an aviation crisis, and that it is time we in this place, and the industry, made a lot more noise about it?

Alan Brown: I completely agree. The UK Government’s attitude is completely blâché and lackadaisical.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, in discussing opportunities, spoke about future markets, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire, who intervened on him to say we do not need Brexit for those opportunities. The whole growth of the airline industry is the result of our membership of the EU, so it is hard to see what opportunities there are. The hon. Gentleman spoke of aviation as an essential component of an outward-looking Britain, but unfortunately that is not the message that people from outwith the UK get at the moment. Britain is becoming too inward-looking, rather than being outward-looking. However, I agree with the sentiments of the hon. Gentleman’s “how” questions to the Minister, and I should like to hear the response.

Clearly, no Westminster Hall debate would be complete without a contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He certainly knows how to maximise the lack of a time limit; he used all his experience there. It was good to hear him talk about the importance of Bombardier to his constituency, but it reminded me of the games that can be played in trade negotiations, and protectionism such as the recent carry-on in the US. I am glad that that has been resolved, and it was good to hear about the new order for 60 planes to go to Latvia. I wish them well with the opportunities and jobs that it will bring.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about bringing positivity, but then even he had to admit that Brexit is not a quick and easy process, so I find it hard to believe in the opportunities that will suddenly arise the day after Brexit. I agree with him about the opportunities that the third runway at Heathrow would bring, but I hope he shares my concern at the fact that the UK Government have not confirmed how they will provide protection to domestic slots that are supposed to open with the expansion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire confirmed that the single aviation market is what has transformed travel in the UK and within the EU, with the connectivity and opportunities it has brought. However, Brexit now brings risks to companies such as Ryanair, which is so important to her local airport, Prestwick. She highlighted the fact that those companies operate using the freedoms of the European common aviation area, and the registration issues that will arise post-Brexit.

Finally, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) correctly highlighted issues to do with EASA—that it is not just a matter of safety. He pointed out the standards that it imposes for pilot registration, and consequent issues relating to conversion to the CAA and a bilateral agreement. We need to know the Government’s plans as to membership of EASA.

It is clear that from the perspective of Tory Back-Bench Members the future of the aviation seems not to be of much concern. It is surprising that those Benches are empty.

As the clock ticks towards Brexit, the UK Government’s handling of the aviation sector sums up their shambolic approach, including the attitude of the Secretary of State for Transport, who is an arch-Brexiteer and has the blasé attitude that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, “It will be all right on the night; everything will be okay.” I am speaking of a Secretary of State who does not know how the US-Canada border works for lorry crossings, and who seems still not to accept Brexit’s implications for the Ireland-Northern Ireland border. He is someone who goes along with the mantra “They need us more than we need them,” and the assertion “You know what—Spain needs flights, and the tourists who come from the UK, or their economy will crash.” That level of arrogance is not enough to get over the finishing line, which will need hard thinking, hard negotiations and a willingness to compromise.

Let us consider the promises on an aviation deal, to date. In November 2016, in a debate on Brexit, the Transport Secretary said he was “in absolutely no doubt that we will secure in good time and effectively the agreements that our aviation sector needs to continue to fly around the world”—[Official Report, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 953].

In October 2017 he told the Transport Committee: “I am absolutely certain that over the coming months we will have mutual sensible arrangements put in place.”
On the open skies agreement with the US, another EU benefit, he said in October 2016 that his “expectation and my intention would be that we retain the open skies arrangement for the United States.”

In March 2018, after media reports that the US would offer only its standard bilateral agreement, those claims were rebutted. We heard from Nick Calio, the chief executive of Airlines for America, who said:

“...in terms of the timetable, we hope something will be in place as early as the end of the month or the beginning of April.”

There we are. Two years on from initial claims of how easily and imminently those definitive agreements would be reached, I ask the Minister where they are. Yesterday in an article in The Guardian we learned that with five months to go the Secretary of State for Transport admits that negotiations on an aviation agreement have not even started. What does the Minister say about that? It is truly shameful, if it is true.

It is now five months to Brexit day. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire said, airlines are now selling seats with disclaimers for post-Brexit issues. Clearly, people are being put off from making bookings beyond Brexit. It is a fact that lack of certainty is curbing airline expansion and the opening of new routes in the UK, with respect to the UK. If an EU airline has a choice of a new destination, it will clearly choose the internal EU market over the UK. That will be a simple business decision to make.

The UK Government have clearly been operating on the premise that there is no way the EU will allow flights to be grounded, because of the inconvenience that that would cause EU citizens and airlines. I agree that it seems inconceivable; but it also now seems to be a real possibility, and our only method of overcoming it seems to be to kick it into the long grass of a transition period. It is clear that the proper preparations for no-deal are not in place. There will be some sort of fudge. It will be kicked down the road and not be dealt with properly. Why do not the UK Government look at the advice about the no-deal technical notice for aviation, single aviation market? It just makes sense.

We have heard that the UK Government have been making contingency plans for no deal. They, too, have warned about the risk of planes being grounded. However, the advice about the no-deal technical notice for aviation seems to be that each airline is to negotiate directly with the relevant authority in each country that it wants to fly to, and must get approval from EASA, with the slight caveat added that at present there is no process enabling individual airlines to do that. What kind of no-deal preparations are those? It is saying to the airlines, “It is over to you lot, because we don’t know what to do.”

Dr Whitford: Does my hon. Friend recognise that the open skies agreement is not just with America, but also with 16 other countries, and that those agreements would also fall?

Alan Brown: Absolutely, and that highlights the absolute chaos there would be if there is genuinely no deal and no arrangements are in place to fly to those countries.

The no-deal preparations confirm the UK Government’s incompetence, lack of direction and inability to manage this process. Will the Minister say what contingency plans have gone into border control? We have already heard that UK Border Agency currently fails to meet its waiting time targets, so what are the proposals for increased personnel and preventing queues at the border?

What plans have been made for customs checks? I accept that airports are probably more suited to deal with the implications of no deal than the ports currently are, but we still need to know about the Government’s plans, discussions and dialogues with airlines. I look forward to getting some clarity from the Minister. It would also be ideal to hear directly from the aviation Minister, but—this kind of sums up this place—the aviation Minister is in the other place, so MPs do not get to scrutinise and interrogate her properly.

3.31 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for securing this important and timely debate. His excellent speech set out the current and future benefits of the aviation sector, as well as the possible risks. He said that more than 25,000 jobs—a staggering number—are directly supported by the Manchester Airport campus in his constituency. That is remarkable, and I pay tribute to Manchester Airports Group for its great work.

Labour believes that a strong aviation sector is crucial to the UK’s status as a global, outward-looking nation, and it is even more important following our decision to leave the European Union. As we have heard, Britain has the largest aviation network in Europe and the third largest in the world. It creates a million jobs, brings in tax revenues, and is vital for importing and exporting trade.

We are now just five months away from leaving the EU, and as the days pass, the risk of a no-deal Brexit becomes greater. Regrettably, it seems to be becoming more likely by the day that we might leave the European Union without a deal. Let us be clear: a no-deal Brexit would be a disaster for the UK aviation sector—indeed, the Government’s aviation technical notices relating to no deal confirmed that crashing out of the EU without a deal would be a total disaster for the UK’s aviation sector. It would have a serious impact, and that cannot be dismissed as scaremongering. It is crucial that the Government now prioritise securing a deal for the aviation sector, and provide the industry with the certainty it needs in the run-up to March 2019 and beyond.

Labour has always maintained that the aviation sector should have been the first priority for the Government in their negotiations with the EU. Despite that, when the Transport Secretary addressed the annual conference of the Airport Operators Association on Monday, we heard that the Government are still negotiating future arrangements for air services with the EU. Indeed, it is worse than that because, as I understand it, the Transport Secretary has not had a single meeting with one of his counterparts from the 27 European member states to discuss what would happen if we are in no-deal territory.

Ministers might like to boast that 95% of the Brexit withdrawal agreement is done, but that is completely irrelevant as there can be no agreement unless everything is agreed—a point reiterated and again by the Prime Minister—and that includes reaching a suitable
agreement on aviation. Consumers and businesses have benefited from the UK’s global connectivity and access to markets, and the Government must build on that as we leave the EU. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what steps the Government are taking to improve our global connectivity through aviation, post Brexit.

Labour believes that any new service agreements for the aviation industry following Brexit should seek to replicate existing arrangements as much as possible. First, and foremost, we must retain access to the Single European Sky air traffic management system. Since 2007 we have enjoyed an open skies agreement with the United States of America which, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made clear, includes 16 other countries. That must also continue.

Through our membership of the EU we are members of the European single aviation market, which allows airlines based in Britain to operate throughout Europe. There is no World Trade Organisation fall-back for the aviation sector, which means that unless the Government negotiate a deal there will be no legal right to operate flights to Europe. It is no good saying continually that everything will be all right on the night. The sector is worried, and it is crucial that we retain our status as a full and engaged member of the European Aviation Safety Agency. Alongside France we have been a key contributor to the development of European safety regulations and rulemaking, and nobody wants the UK to lose that influence. UK air passenger rights following Brexit should not be fewer than they currently are, and that is particularly important for disabled travellers and passengers with reduced mobility.

The entire aviation sector in the UK has developed through EU law, and it has led to cheaper fares and greater choice for consumers. Our current deal has given us greater consumer rights, and passengers can claim compensation for delayed and cancelled flights. We are members of the European Aviation Safety Agency, which deals with the safe operation of aviation. All that could easily be put at risk if we leave the EU without a deal. Will the Minister say what steps the Government are taking to ensure that we will have the same air passenger rights once we have left the European Union? Overall, the Government’s shambolic handling of the Brexit negotiations could lead to thousands of skilled jobs being lost in the aviation sector unless they change tack and get a grip now.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister could conclude his remarks no later than 3.57 pm, that will allow Mr Kane time to sum up the debate.

3.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am grateful to you, Mr Hollobone, and rejoice in your chairmanship of this debate. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—an old and much-loved colleague of mine from the Treasury Committee—for securing this important debate on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the aviation sector.

I need hardly say that this is a matter of great importance to the Government, and a topic on which there is a keen focus on achieving our desired outcome. The hon. Gentleman asked for reassurance, and I can tell him that aviation remains a high priority for the Government, just as it is for him. I point out to him and to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) that this country is far from not having an outward-looking industry—nothing could be further from the truth. We are proud of the aerospace companies. We know that, like all global businesses, they constantly have to manage change in their political circumstances, and we are pleased that there has been no shortage of capital investment in the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is no longer in his place, but as he said, not only has there been new investment such as that in Bombardier but, as he put it, we can expect good times to be around the corner, based on the economic flows that he has observed. He is right about that, and we have projects such as the joint investment with the MOD and RAF Lossiemouth, and the Airbus Wing Integration Centre in Filton—my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) has worked closely on that, alongside his other work with Airbus—and the opening of Boeing’s first European manufacturing facility in Sheffield. Those are not the actions of companies that are worried about the UK, or about the safety of their investment and the possibility of it growing in the aviation sector—far from it—nor are they the actions of companies that are concerned that the UK might be, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun suggested, turning in on itself. On the contrary, they show that the aviation industry is confident about Britain’s place in the world post Brexit, and rightly so.

This is a priority for us and, as the Government’s White Paper sets out, we are seeking to secure an agreement that maintains reciprocal and liberalised—I emphasise the word liberalised—aviation access between and within the territory of the UK and the EU, alongside UK participation in the EASA system. There is something of a contradiction among the things said by Opposition Members, in that they are perfectly happy to recognise that these things are matters that go down to the last minutes, because only when everything is agreed is anything agreed, but at the same time they are desperate for there to be more progress. In many cases it is the EU which is inhibiting progress on this for negotiating purposes.

Jesse Norman: I take all comments and points made by hon. Members across the House with great seriousness, but all I am doing is pointing out an inconsistency in the Opposition’s position. The Government remain confident that an agreement will be secured. Not only that, it is interesting to see that there appears to be increasing confidence of that within the private sector as well, as the remarks of several chief executives of airlines have recently made clear.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jesse Norman: I have a short period of time in which to speak. I have been given a little extra time by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). I have dozens of points to address but if hon. Gentlemen wish to intervene, I am happy to take their points.
Alan Brown: Can the Minister explain what the Government’s confidence in reaching an aviation agreement is based on, given that the Secretary of State told the Airport Operators Association conference that discussions have not yet begun?

Jesse Norman: As so often the case, I am sad to have given way to the hon. Gentleman because these points are covered precisely in my speech and if I had had the extra 45 seconds to be allowed to make them, I could have reached them. We are seeking liberalised aviation access. We recognise that is what UK and EU consumers and businesses want and need. As we move forward it is important to be clear that we recognise that it is in everyone’s interests to do a deal quickly and to make it a good deal.

Before I turn to the many specific points that have been raised, as colleagues have said aviation is crucial to the UK’s economy and its standing as a great trading nation. It has been a global success—there can be no doubt about that. We have the third largest aviation network in the world and the biggest in Europe, with direct flights to more than 370 international destinations in 100 or so countries, providing at least £22 billion to the UK economy every year and supporting more than half a million UK jobs.

As a Government we do not wish to see the introduction of new barriers that would hinder the growth of our aviation industry—I do not think any Member of Parliament wishes to see that. That is why we are seeking to strike the right deal with the EU, one that allows that sector to grow and prosper. We should be clear that not just the UK will benefit from a liberal aviation market. It is in the interest of all EU countries and citizens that a comprehensive air transport agreement is negotiated.

Lest we forget, 164 million passengers travelled between the UK and EU airports in 2017. UK residents made 42.7 million visits to the EU and spent an estimated £21.3 billion while they were there. It cannot be in the interests of either UK or EU businesses or consumers for flights to stop, let alone be interrupted. That is why we are working so hard to reach a deal which continues the current arrangements, in as close to a liberalised form as we can.

As hon. Members across the Chamber have said, consumers and industry want certainty, and quickly. So do the Government and much, if not all, of the EU and its member states. It is true that negotiations on transport have yet to begin—that is an EU decision—but let me assure Members that we are ready for that when they do. We work closely with the aviation industry to ensure that the needs of the global sector are factored into our negotiations. Our objectives for future partnership on aviation are precisely to preserve the connectivity, the high safety standards and the efficient use of airspace that consumers benefit from today.

There are many reasons why the EU should and will, I think, agree to a liberal aviation deal with the UK. The UK has been at the forefront of driving forward the liberalisation of aviation markets across the world, precisely the point made eloquently by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). It is that liberalisation that has driven down prices and opened up accessibility to aviation markets for many people across this country.

We provide EASA with a significant amount of expertise and have played a key role in enhancing safety standards across Europe. One of the ironies of the present situation is that EASA was set up if not largely by the Civil Aviation Authority then with heavy influence from this country. We are a global leader in aviation security, with one of the best security systems in the world. Our geographical position in the aviation network means that along with Ireland, the UK services more than 80% of traffic entering or leaving EU airspace from the north Atlantic.

We start from a unique position of having wholly aligned regulatory standards with the EU. No two agreements are exactly the same; we recognise that. Each one will inevitably be tailored to suit the circumstances of the parties involved, but we seek an agreement on which we can build a further liberal future aviation relationship. The benefits that both sides gain from air transport are clear, and the benefits that we have described are so evident that we feel some justification in believing that the arrangements will continue.

As a responsible Government, we must also contemplate the unlikely event that we might conceivably be forced to leave the EU without a deal. We believe that flights between the UK and EU will continue, even if that happened. It would be in nobody’s interest to introduce obstacles to airlines or to limit the choice of destinations that passengers enjoy today. The continuation of flights is far and away the highest probability, but we have to prepare for all eventualities until we can be certain of the outcome of negotiations. Our preparation plans continue at pace, against the possibility of a no deal, in part to support the final deal we eventually agree.

As part of that planning we have published three aviation technical notices. These set out the pragmatic approach that the UK would take in any no-deal scenario. The point of that approach is to avoid disruption to air services, to support businesses and consumers, and to maintain their rights across the EU. We expect the EU to do the same. We think they will. It is character for them and in the interests of both UK and EU consumers and businesses. Our preference, of course, would be to have in place a multilateral contingency agreement with the EU27. We are pleased that the EU is preparing for contingency plans as well as for future partnership discussions. We would welcome a common approach, but we must prepare for all scenarios.

It is certainly true that the UK and EU aviation sectors urgently need reassurance that we are working on positive post-EU exit solutions for all possible outcomes and that in any scenario there will be continued connectivity. Regardless of the outcome, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 will provide the maximum possible certainty to individuals and businesses about their legal rights and obligations as we leave the EU.

Turning to third countries, we are also aware that the issue reaches beyond the EU. We are working hard to deliver another priority, which is to replace quickly EU-based third country agreements with countries such as the US and Canada. We are working with these countries to ensure new replacement arrangements are in place after we leave the EU. Despite some reports to the contrary, talks have been positive and we have made significant progress. We believe with some confidence that these arrangements will be ready for exit.
[Jesse Norman]

The UK also has 111 independently negotiated bilateral air service agreements with countries all over the world, including China, India and Brazil. There will be no change to these when the UK leaves the EU. As always, we will continue to seek new and improved bilateral air service agreements with the rest of the world, seeking to improve connectivity, choice and value for money for businesses and consumers.

I turn now to the points raised in the debate, starting with those of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East. He said that it was critical that the choices that constituents are able to make remain the same. We recognise that. It is important to be aware that tourism is booming across the UK and is now worth over £66 billion annually to the economy. As he knows, we are proposing reciprocal visa-free travel arrangements to enable UK and EU citizens to continue to travel freely for tourism. The Home Office has set out proposals on the movement of workers and will set out future immigration policy shortly. We have been clear that we seek a comprehensive agreement on air transport that provides for continuity of services and opportunities.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East asked whether there was an adequate fall-back. As I said, our preference is for a contingency agreement with the EU27 to be in place, but since the Commission will not engage with the UK at the moment, for tactical reasons of negotiation, we need to discuss bilaterally with member states what arrangements will be put in place. The aviation technical notices clearly set out the pragmatic approach we propose in any no-deal scenario. Specifically, we intend to give permits to EU airlines—this addresses the point the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire made about Ryanair—to allow them to operate in the UK, and we expect that to be reciprocated by the EU.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East and other colleagues asked what practical steps the Government are taking to secure the mutual recognition of aviation safety standards. Of course we recognise that our continued participation in EASA in some form will reduce regulatory burdens for the sector. As we set out in the White Paper, there is an established mechanism and a precedent for third countries to participate in the EASA system.

All UK-issued safety approvals and certificates conform with the international requirements of the Chicago convention, so all those associated with the international operation of UK-registered aircraft should continue to be recognised for the operation of air services by UK aircraft. Let me be clear that we are pressing the EU for our continued participation in EASA and EASA as soon as possible, to ensure that any respective contingency and other plans are fully aligned. We seek an improved shared understanding of the situation on all sides.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concern that the Government may not be prepared to use the opportunity to prepare the aviation sector for the next five to 10 years. As colleagues across the House have rightly pointed out, that issue is in many ways independent of Brexit. As colleagues know, the Government are developing a new aviation strategy, the purpose of which is specifically to achieve a safe, secure and sustainable aviation sector. That is a long-term strategy. It is not a 10-year or even a five-year thing—it is a strategy out to 2050 that is designed to lay the foundations of a strategic shift and development in the way our aviation industry operates.

We have a strong focus on consumer issues, but of course we also champion the economic benefits of aviation. We will consider how we can maximise the role of our world-class aviation sector in developing trade links, but we recognise the need to focus inward on industrial strategy as well as outward on international trade. On 7 April, the Government published the aviation strategy next steps document, which outlines the key challenges ahead for aviation and our considerations in responding to them. We plan to deliver a final aviation strategy in early 2019—for those who asked, that is not so far away.

Turning to airports and Border Force, the Department for Transport continues to work closely with Border Force on the “Welcome to the UK” initiative. Border Force recognises that, given predicted passenger growth, which is undiminished by the concerns that were raised, queues at passport control may get longer. The purpose of the recent announcement that millions more people will be able to use e-passport gates was precisely to meet that long-term contingency. The two sides are committed to working closely with the industry to minimise queuing times by reducing last-minute schedule changes and ensuring that service-level agreements are set at the right level. Alongside that, the Government plan to consider whether there are additional or alternative funding mechanisms in the medium term.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East rightly asked whether skills and training will be adequately maintained in the face of the changes to the sector after Brexit. I reassure him that the Government are very much committed to working with industry to support the aviation sector. The Department is working closely with officials across Government to explore all those issues and to incentivise the growth of the UK aviation sector in the longer term by examining options to stimulate skills and training alongside and through the work that is being done in this sector under the industrial strategy. We believe aviation is critical to both the UK and the EU, and we are determined to make it so in the future, too.

The hon. Member for Strangford, who was not in his place when I mentioned him earlier, is absolutely right to highlight the continued investment in this country. He said good times are around the corner. I think times are pretty good at the moment, given the way tourism is booming and the economy continues to grow. We have a late-stage economy that is still growing at more than 2.5%—I think we can all be very pleased about that. He is absolutely right that that performance is not discounting a disaster post Brexit; it is actually discounting continued business and economic growth, and rightly so.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire rightly pointed out the huge falls in flight costs that resulted from liberalisation. She highlighted Hanover. I am pleased to say that when George I came to this country from Hanover he did not have to go by aeroplane, but it would have been a lot cheaper if he had done so—in her judgment, the Elector of Hanover could have come here in a matter of hours for something like £50. Let me reassure the hon. Lady that Ryanair should have no reason at all not to fly to Britain. The UK intends to continue to offer arrangements that will allow it to fly
Mr Hollobone: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. We have had a good debate. Now we know the Minister has a pilot’s licence, we know he could have brought it in to land himself, but he had to wind up.

Since Richard Arkwright built his mill in 1783, Manchester has been a global trading city. That is why this issue is important to me, my constituents and the 30 million passengers, and that is why I look at a global Britain. I say with all gentleness to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned licences, and I have a private pilot’s licence myself. Tragically, I have not used it much recently, but I am sensitive to the point he raised. I am confident in the capacity of the CAA to manage any issues and to ramp up. Given the time, I should probably sit down. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I call Mike Kane to bring the debate in to land.

3.57 pm

Mike Kane: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. We have had a good debate. Now we know the Minister has a pilot’s licence, we know he could have brought it in to land himself, but he had to wind up.

Since Richard Arkwright built his mill in 1783, Manchester has been a global trading city. That is why this issue is important to me, my constituents and the 30 million passengers, and that is why I look at a global Britain. I say with all gentleness to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned licences, and I have a private pilot’s licence myself. Tragically, I have not used it much recently, but I am sensitive to the point he raised. I am confident in the capacity of the CAA to manage any issues and to ramp up. Given the time, I should probably sit down. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Hollobone.

3.59 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered treatment for alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

Hon. Members might wish to know what alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency is. It is a rare and complex hereditary illness, and those who suffer from it simply refer to it as alpha-1 and to themselves as alphas. Some people affected by alpha-1 are in the Public Gallery today.

I will explain the condition: alpha-1 antitrypsin, or AAT, is a protein produced in the liver. In healthy people, it is released into the blood circulation to protect the body from the effects of inflammation, but for those with alpha-1 the protein does not function properly and is trapped in the liver. That can cause damage to the liver and, because the protein is unable to circulate around the body, the lungs lack the protection they need from the damaging effects of pollutants and infections. Those with alpha-1 are particularly susceptible and sensitive to cigarette smoke, for example.

Alpha-1 affects both children and adults, and the condition is chronic and progressive. It can affect life expectancy and lead to disability, leaving sufferers dependent on the health service and carers. The damage it can cause to the liver can lead to jaundice, sickness and tiredness, and those with the condition are more prone to chest infections, often leading to a swift deterioration in health. In extreme cases, patients can require an organ transplant.

In the early stages, it is common for alpha-1 not to be properly diagnosed, and sufferers are often thought to have asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, more widely known as COPD. In many instances, they are treated for those conditions for a number of years before a correct diagnosis is given. As with most conditions, the earlier diagnosis takes place and appropriate treatment can begin, the better someone’s chances of managing the condition.

I became aware of the condition in 2012, when a constituent of mine, Sarah Parrin, attended my constituency advice surgery and brought along her son, Stephen Leadbetter. Stephen’s case was characteristic of many others across the country. He had been thought initially to have severe asthma; he had suffered with lung problems since the age of 14 and had undergone several surgeries due to pneumothoraces. Those occur when small sacs of air collect in the pleural space between the lung and the chest wall, creating pressure on the lungs that can lead to lung collapse.

Stephen was 22 when I met him, and had only just been diagnosed with alpha-1, eight years after he had really started to suffer. The thing I remember most about his mother’s bringing him to see me was her telling me how things would have been so much better if Stephen had been diagnosed earlier and been able to access specialised services. If that had been the case, his health might not have declined so rapidly during his teenage years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to Westminster Hall for consideration. As my party’s health spokesperson,
this is something that I have responsibility for, so I appreciate it. While AATD can cause a lot of conditions, such as COPD or liver disease, it is a separate condition. If treatment for it was available in the UK, that could prevent the development of other lung and liver conditions, as he has said. Surely the prevention of other diseases would be of long-term benefit to the national health service. I say that to the Minister in particular. While there are some lifestyle changes that people can make, AATD is inherited and if a person has inherited two ZZ genotypes they are likely to develop further issues.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that time must be given to clinical trials involving AAT augmentation therapy? If he does, perhaps the Minister would like to respond positively to that.

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Gentleman anticipates two of the asks that I will come to later; I thank him for that helpful contribution.

Going back to Stephen’s condition, he suffered very seriously from chest infections. In fact, at one point he suffered with his lungs collapsing, and Birmingham Children’s Hospital, which was treating him at the time, took the decision to staple his lungs to his chest wall. As I say, it was eight years after first presenting with the issues that Stephen’s own general practitioner tested him for alpha-1 and that was found to be the condition he was suffering from.

The British Lung Foundation estimates that approximately 25,000 people in the UK suffer from the disease, and while many can live relatively normal and healthy lives, others such as Stephen suffer from the condition. Interestingly, I was contacted only today by a colleague here in Parliament, who told me that they suffer from the condition and that, as one of three siblings in a family of six, they were involved in a study based at University College London in the 1970s. That was someone we would not recognise as being a sufferer, which exemplifies the fact that not everybody shows the symptoms that so many people have.

It is rarer for children to suffer, which explains why the doctors who treated Stephen did not test for alpha-1 initially, but we can be grateful that by 2012 he was finally correctly diagnosed. Stephen’s mother Sarah was very concerned about the lack of awareness of the condition and became involved with the Alpha-1 Alliance, a charity formed in 1997 to support those suffering from the condition and their families, carers and friends. We are joined today by members of that group and affiliated organisations, as well as Professor David Parr, who is head of medicine and clinical director for cardiothoracic services and a consultant respiratory physician at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire.

Both Sarah and Stephen, who suffers from alpha-1, have told me that they found the support from the Alpha-1 Alliance and the alpha-1 support group invaluable. When I met them back in 2012, they asked me to get more involved, learn and understand more about the condition, and do what I might as their Member of Parliament to raise awareness here in Westminster. To that end, I raised the condition with the Leader of the House in business questions in December 2012; I understand that was the first time that the condition alpha-1 had been mentioned in the House. We then arranged a seminar and a report was brought to Parliament, and there I met Professor Parr, whose hospital, UHCW, happens to serve the residents of my Rugby constituency.

At that time, there was a sense that the work of the Alpha-1 Alliance was gaining traction and starting to raise awareness. We had a meeting with the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), and Karen North and Margaret Millar of the alpha-1 support group came along to explain a little about the condition and how the treatment for it could be improved.

Testing for this condition is a relatively straightforward process, requiring a simple blood test. Many organisations, including the World Health Organisation, have made recommendations on who should be tested for the condition, such as anyone who suffers from emphysema, COPD or chronic bronchitis; people with a family history of liver disease; and certainly blood relatives of a person diagnosed with alpha-1. Perhaps also newborns and children with unexplained liver diseases should be considered as potential sufferers from alpha-1.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome today’s debate, as I also have a constituent, Tina Walker, who has alpha-1. She travels from Swansea to the clinic in Coventry twice a year. Last night, I also had an email from an ex-pupil who I used to teach in Wigan, whose daughter—she must be just a small child—also has the condition. I feel strongly that we parliamentarians should be working together. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be wise of us to urge the Government to run a UK-wide campaign to raise awareness? As he says, this involves just a simple blood test.

Mark Pawsey: Part and parcel of our efforts today is to achieve precisely that. I am delighted that the hon. Lady’s constituent comes to Coventry and is being treated by the excellent services at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire.

Unfortunately, alpha-1 is not yet curable, and no specific treatment for the disease is freely available in the UK; it is a matter of treating only the symptoms with the appropriate therapeutic methods. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to intravenous AAT protein augmentation therapy, which involves replacing the missing AAT protein. That treatment is available in the United States, Spain, Germany and Italy, for example, but it is not yet available in the UK.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—the Government body that produces guidelines on which treatments to make available—only last month published draft guidelines that rejected the use of the only licensed augmentation therapy product in the UK, Respreeza. It has had a UK licence since 2015, but was unfortunately deemed by NICE to be too expensive to be made available on the NHS. We acknowledge that it is expensive; lifelong therapy costs around £60,000 per patient per year. NICE continues to evaluate that and will make its final recommendations next year. The entire alpha-1 community has been heavily involved in pressing the case for patients across the country to be prescribed the treatment.

Only the symptoms of alpha-1 sufferers are treated, often by inhaled medications developed for people suffering from asthma and COPD, rather than specific treatments for the lung damage caused by alpha-1. The other issue
is that those who suffer from alpha-1 become susceptible to chest infections, which was certainly the case for Stephen Leadbetter, and it is vital that they are treated quickly with antibiotics at the first sign of infection and are vaccinated every year against flu.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and I commend the work of the alpha-1 patient community in pressing for it as well. Does he share my frustration that the highly specialised NHS alpha-1 service has been approved and budgeted for and was due to be put in place earlier this year, but may not actually be installed by next year?

**Mark Pawsey**: That is certainly a frustration for the many patients who suffer. I hope that the Minister will address progress towards the outcome that we would all like to see.

There are changes that patients can make to their lifestyle to help to manage the condition, including specific exercise programmes and altering their diets. It is also important for them to avoid being around second-hand smoke and other environmental pollutants, such as open fires, petrol fumes, paint, solvents and dust, and that they avoid coming into contact with anyone suffering from a cold or the flu. However, that is often not enough. There is a need for Government action. We would like the Government to look at the prescribed specialised services advisory group’s recommendations and address the specific recommendation for a national, highly specialised service for patients with severe alpha-1.

A Department of Health and Social Care paper sets it out that that service, referred to by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), should be operational by April 2019, which is only six months away. However, I understand that the formal development of the service has not yet commenced, and that it is highly unlikely that it will be operational by the original deadline.

The need for progress on the service forms one of the two principal objectives of the alpha-1 patient community, and I look forward to the Minister’s commenting on that. The second particular ask is to ensure that alpha-1 antitrypsin augmentation therapy—access to Respreeza, the only licensed treatment—will be available. I hope that the Minister responds positively to that.

It is the view of the alpha-1 patient community that the Government should focus on five key areas. The first is that that highly specialised service should become operational in a timely fashion. Secondly, patients should be involved at all stages in the development and implementation of the service to ensure that the patient voice is fully heard and taken into consideration. Thirdly, we are calling for a review of the impact of the NICE highly specialised technologies guidelines on patient access to rare disease treatments.

Fourthly, we are looking to apply a broader decision framework to the NICE process of evaluating the value of rare disease treatments, looking particularly at the social and societal benefits that impact patients and carers. Finally, we ask the Government to consider the appropriateness of introducing a more formalised process of conditional approval of rare disease treatments in England, such as alpha-1 augmentation therapy, as is being implemented in Scotland.

I shall conclude by referring to an email I received from a patient only yesterday that sets out her concerns with alpha-1 and its misdiagnosis. The sufferer emailed me to say that her mother died from antitrypsin deficiency, and that she now has the lung version of the disease. She is 48-years-old, and two years ago was a runner, but can now barely run for a bus or climb stairs. Her lung function has dropped dramatically in just one year. She is an ex-smoker and acknowledges the harm that smoking caused with respect to the condition. Had she been diagnosed earlier, she would have been able to make better lifestyle choices. The bit that got me was when she said that the deficiency for those who are symptomatic progresses at a very fast rate, and that, for many, it will end in gasping for breath for a long, drawn-out period, until such time as their lungs stop functioning completely. She says it feels like being eaten alive.

If the Government can work towards the two principal objectives and five key recommendations of the alpha-1 patient community, there will be a huge benefit to a significant group of people. It is our hope that the present and future needs of patients suffering this rare condition may finally be met.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30 pm.

4.17 pm

**The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury** (Nigel Adams): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this important debate on the need to raise awareness of alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency disease. I was unaware of the condition until I heard about the debate, and it has been enlightening to learn about it and the number of people it affects in this country. He set out, with great clarity and passion, the concerns of alpha-1 patients across the country.

With up to 8,000 rare diseases identified so far—a number that steadily grows as our diagnostic tools improve—the Government remain dedicated to improving the lives of all those living with a rare condition and to implementing the 51 commitments of the UK strategy for rare diseases, which was reinforced in the Prime Minister’s speech in June, in which she set out her future vision. That vision will be underpinned by increased funding for the NHS, so that the UK can lead the world in the use of data and technology to prevent, and not just treat, illness; to diagnose conditions before symptoms occur; and, importantly, to deliver personalised treatment informed not only by a general understanding of disease but by our own data, including our own genetic make-ups.

As we have heard from hon. Members, people with alpha-1 have low levels of the protective enzyme alpha1-proteinase inhibitor. That means that they are more vulnerable to body tissue damage from infections and environmental toxins—tobacco smoke, in particular. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby said, there is no cure for alpha-1, and treatment is focused on alleviating the symptoms.

My hon. Friend referred to the ongoing highly specialised technology evaluation by NICE of the drug Respreeza. That is a type of therapy called replacement therapy. It aims to boost the levels of alpha-1 antitrypsin in the
blood. As those in the Chamber will know, NICE is an independent body and its highly specialised technologies evaluation committee makes recommendations on the use of new and existing highly specialised medicines and treatments within the NHS in England.

I am confident that NICE has in place a robust framework for evaluating technologies for rare diseases. As was said, it has not yet published its final guidance on the use of Respreeza for treating emphysema in patients with alpha-1, but it recently consulted on its draft guidance. As we heard, NICE’s evaluation committee is due to meet again to consider its recommendations in March 2019. That is to enable the company that makes Respreeza to prepare and submit additional information for the committee to consider. I am assured that, in developing its final recommendations, NICE will take fully into account all the comments that it received in response to the consultation, along with any additional information provided by the company. We look forward to hearing NICE’s recommendations after consideration has concluded.

As my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) mentioned, Ministers agreed with the advice of the prescribed specialised services advisory group that services for people diagnosed with alpha-1 should be nationally commissioned by NHS England and not by clinical commissioning groups. May I reassure my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman that NHS England is engaging with NICE on the HST evaluation of Respreeza? Once final guidance is received, following the evaluation committee’s meeting scheduled for March next year, NHS England will consider the commissioning implications in consultation with the specialised respiratory clinical reference group.

Should Respreeza be recommended by NICE, it would be for NHS England to make funding available within 90 calendar days of the positive evaluation. Should that be the case, NHS England would want to be assured that the centres initiating the treatment had the appropriate expertise and resources in place. NHS England is committed to involving patients in the development of new services, and routinely does so in line with the specialised commissioning framework, and with dedicated working groups that inform service specification and have patient representation.

As my hon. Friend said, alpha-1 is often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. It is sometimes diagnosed late, as in the case of his constituent, Mr Leadbetter. More can be done to diagnose rare conditions earlier. Whole genome sequencing is increasingly utilised as a diagnostic tool for rare diseases in individuals with unrecognised signs and symptoms. I am pleased to report that about 25% of rare disease patients who have their genome sequenced through the 100,000 Genomes Project now receive a diagnosis for the first time.

The genomic medicine service was launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 2 October 2018, making the UK the first in the world to integrate genomic technologies, including whole genome sequencing, into routine clinical care. The first national genomic test directory also became operational from October this year. It specifies which genomic tests are commissioned by the NHS in England, the technology by which they are available and the

patients who will be eligible to access them. Alpha-1 is included in the new directory, which will be kept up to date on an annual basis to keep pace with scientific and technological advances.

Let me refer to one or two of the comments from hon. Members. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the prevention of disease and clinical trials having taken place. Improving the lives of people with alpha-1 through research is critical. We support continued research into rare diseases through the National Institute for Health Research. That has established 20 biomedical research centres that develop new treatments for patients with a range of rare diseases.

The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) referred to a UK-wide campaign to raise awareness of this condition. I fully agree with her and support the notion that we should always be working together to raise awareness of alpha-1. Many of our initiatives are aimed at raising awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals and the general public; it must be extremely difficult for a GP to have knowledge of, spot the symptoms of, and recognise up to 8,000 rare diseases. Health Education England and Genomics England have produced a range of educational materials about rare diseases aimed at those very people—healthcare professionals, including GPs, as the first point of contact in the NHS. Information about rare diseases is also provided for patients and their families.

Let me refer to some of the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby. He talked about allowing patients to be closely involved at all stages of the development and implementation of the service that we are discussing. NHS England routinely involves patients in the development of new services, in line with the specialised commissioning framework, and there are dedicated working groups that inform service specification development. My hon. Friend talked about a review to reflect the impact that the changes to the NICE HST guidelines have had on patient access. NICE’s methods and processes for assessing drugs have been carefully developed over time and are internationally respected. It continues to keep its procedures under review. That includes extensive engagement with patient groups.

Mark Pawsey: I want to press the Minister on the availability of the specialised service, on the assumption that use of Respreeza will be approved by NICE. We are running a little behind. Does he think that the service, which was intended to be available by 2019, might be available by 2020? Is there hope for sufferers that that service might be available to them?

Nigel Adams: It is absolutely a matter for NICE to make its recommendations, but I think that, if this was approved, we could have a situation in which it could be available by at least April 2020. I hope that that is some encouraging news for my hon. Friend. I probably need to wrap up the debate, but my hon. Friend also talked about the Government considering the appropriateness of introducing a more formal process of conditional approval for rare disease treatments such as alpha-1 augmentation therapy. The Department has no plans currently to establish a new assessment process for the evaluation of rare disease treatments. NICE’s methods and processes for developing its recommendations have been developed over the past 20 years through extensive engagement with interested parties.
Finally, let me assure my hon. Friend and all other hon. Members who have taken part in the debate that the Government are dedicated to improving the lives of all patients with rare diseases such as alpha-1. The publication of the UK strategy for rare diseases in 2013 was a significant milestone in that respect, and the strategy is now being implemented across the UK. The strategy sets out our strategic vision and contains 51 commitments concentrating on raising awareness, providing better diagnosis and patient care, and ensuring a strong emphasis on the importance of research in our quest better to understand and treat rare diseases. Research is at the heart of better treatment and, we hope, prevention. That is why in 2017 the NIHR Resource for Translational Research in Common and Rare Diseases was launched, supported by £36.5 million of NIHR funding.

I thank those who have come to listen to the debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and everyone present for contributing to it and for highlighting and discussing these issues. For their constituents and for all those who suffer from alpha-1 or any rare disease, I hope that I have helped in some way to assure them that the Government and the NHS are working hard to tackle these conditions and to help improve the lives of, and treatment pathways for, all patients.

Question put and agreed to.
what is happening in Lancashire with seismic movement, there is a real concern with the exploratory licence that has been granted that, in areas with unmapped mine shafts, seismic movement will cause collapses and sinkholes at the top. Decisions at the local level are, therefore, more important in this kind of planning application.

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mark Menzies: Let me make some progress and I will take some more interventions.

As the Minister is aware, the Department recently held a consultation on the proposals to bring applications for non-hydraulic fracturing sites under permitted development rights. In addition, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy simultaneously held a consultation on proposals to bring the production phase of a site under the nationally significant infrastructure projects—NSIP—scheme.

I recognise the issues surrounding the development of shale gas sites. The Government’s concern that it takes local mineral rights authorities far too long to consider planning applications carries some legitimacy. It originally took Lancashire County Council 12 months to consider each of the applications in my constituency. It was a further 15 months after appeal before a decision was made on Preston New Road. Four years on, no decision has been made on the Roseacre Wood site.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Would he comment on the fact that Lancashire County Council voted against the planning application, but that was overruled by the Government?

Mark Menzies: I will touch on that further. The situation in Lancashire, particularly with Preston New Road, was slightly more nuanced than that. Officers recommended approval but councillors voted against.

The issue is that we are kidding ourselves if we think that those decisions are being taken locally. Overwhelmingly, they are not. They end up being called in by the Planning Inspectorate, and for some of these sites, there is more than one planning inquiry that runs on at enormous expense and is incredibly complicated. The decision is then taken out of local people’s hands. The situation at the moment is fully flawed.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. That is the very heart of it. We have heard evidence in the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee about the arguments for addressing that, picking it up as a piece of national infrastructure and treating it the same, but are we not denuding our local democracy in that process? We try to respect our democracy here, and it is so important, particularly in the current climate, that people are heard locally.

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is being very generous. Is he aware of the recent comments of the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who said that we need “people power more than ever” and that the Government’s civil society strategy will put communities at the centre of decision making? If the Government were being consistent, should local communities not have more say in fracking matters, and not have their voices taken away?

Mark Menzies: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Menzies: I will try to make some progress, but I shall also try to be generous in taking interventions.

It cannot be the case that decisions that were taking so long are now simply being sped up by the Government’s introduction of applications under permitted development rights. When we are talking about exploration sites, it can sound a bit innocent, but the scale of an exploration site is something to behold.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned rural Pennsylvania, where I went to look at this issue in 2015. I came back with the distinct impression that it can be done in a way that is sensitive to the countryside, but it needs careful planning. North Yorkshire County Council developed a plan that restricts proliferation and density, but the concern with NSIP and permitted development is that they will ride a coach and horses through those restrictions. We need to restrict the development of shale as it is rolled out.

Mark Menzies: Like me, my hon. Friend has experience of dealing with the issue in his constituency.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Menzies: I will give way to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden).

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I have an interest as the hon. Gentleman’s constituency neighbour—he has the end of Preston New Road and I have the beginning of it. He just referred to Roseacre Wood, which is a planning issue and not about the broader issues. As I am sure he has heard, purely and simply on the basis of what happened with Preston New Road on traffic planning, local residents’ concern about the position that Lancashire County Council took on that basis, and about planning terms, is considerable. Is it not regrettable, therefore, that as far as I am aware, no Minister—let alone the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who responded to the previous debate, and who we are now told by The Guardian has been going round talking to companies about how they should be fracking advocates around the world—has taken the trouble to come to Lancashire and see what is going on?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly valid point and I will return in some more detail to the issues of Preston New Road and traffic in a few moments.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Menzies: I do want to make some progress; I am three quarters of the way down the first page of my speech and I have been very generous in giving way.

Along with many colleagues here today, I have made submissions to both consultations, making clear my constituents’ opposition to the proposals, which is a position that is echoed whenever I speak to colleagues from across the House.

I have called this debate to discuss the issue further, as well as to raise the general matter of local involvement in major decisions such as the approval of shale gas sites. Under permitted development, proposals for shale gas exploration are subject to the requirements of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which is administered by the mineral rights authority for the area in which the proposed development will be located. The decisions that are taken are based on the national planning policy framework and include consideration of the operational impacts of the site, traffic management concerns, visual impact and the effect on nearby heritage features, among many other factors. If we were to move to a system whereby proposals for non-hydraulic fracturing shale exploration developments were decided under permitted development rights, that would no longer be the case.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I declare myself as a fracking sceptic, if not an opponent. Does he agree that trying to change the planning regime now, with the heritage that we already have on this issue, does not in my book pass what I would describe as “the sniff test”? It does not quite have legitimacy. It seems a sleight of hand and should be resisted.

Mark Menzies: I could not improve on what my hon. Friend has just said.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Menzies: I will give way in one moment, but I will just make some more progress on permitted development.

As we know, permitted development rights are most commonly used to simplify and speed up minor planning processes around such issues as small property extensions or the change of use of property. Indeed, I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Communities and Local Government, as it was then, at a time when we looked to relax permitted development rights on home extensions and conservatories, and even then the Department had to row back from its original proposals because even with changes on that scale, particularly in urban areas, the impact was there for all to see.

What permitted development rights are not suitable for are new and substantial developments, especially those that have significant and ongoing operational activities associated with them. As the Minister knows, I have extensive knowledge of shale gas development, with the first horizontal wells in the UK within my constituency. These are not small or straightforward developments by any means. They are major industrial sites that require the construction of substantial infrastructure to set up and countless vehicle movements to operate. Indeed, if you will indulge me, Mr Hollobone, I will go through some examples.

I will take the site on Preston New Road first. We have got thousands of tonnes of hardcore piled on top of double-layered polyurethane membranes; big trenches dug around a site that is up to 2 hectares; a 30-metre drilling rig; a 2-metre high perimeter fence; 4.8-metre high bunding and fencing; several cabins that are 3 metres in height; acoustic screening of 5 metres in height; a lighting rig of 9 metres in height; a 2.9-metre high-powered generator; two water tanks that are 3 metres in height; a 10-metre high emergency vent; an access road off a busy main road; and I could go on. Now, who on earth thinks that is equivalent to building a little extension on the side of your bungalow? It is not.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I am very grateful to him for initiating the debate. On that point, he has just described something that is hugely disruptive that we know is hugely unpopular. Does it not strike him as odd that we would subject that enterprise to permitted development, while at the same time making almost impossible the erection of new onshore wind turbines, which has been subjected almost entirely—rightly in my view—to local control? Does that not strike him as being inexplicably inconsistent and give the appearance of a policy that is driven more by ideology than anything else?

Mark Menzies: The inconsistencies in this process are there for all to see, and I really appeal to the Government to start approaching this issue in a sensible and consistent manner, whether we are talking about onshore wind or the shale gas sites that we are discussing today.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Menzies: Let me just make some more progress and I will give way. [Interruption.] Permitted developments are certainly not appropriate for all locations.

Again, this is an issue that I have personal experience of. In addition to Cuadrilla Resources’ site at Preston New Road, proposals were also received for a further site within my constituency, at Roseacre Wood. That application is currently with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, so I appreciate that the Minister in the Chamber will be constrained in what he can say with regard to that site today. However, following its refusal by the local mineral rights authority and the decision going to a planning inquiry, it was then further turned down. But under permitted development that site would have been allowed to go ahead, even though one of the reasons it was turned down is that it is in an area with very narrow roads. No matter how many times the company tried to cut and recut the traffic management plan to get it through a planning inspector, it could not stand up to any form of scrutiny. I myself have gone with local people down those roads. In one case, they even hired an HGV of a similar size to those that would be taking product to and from the proposed site, and we could see...
that it was downright dangerous. The road was simply not designed to take either that size of vehicle or that volume of traffic.

Sir Kevin Barron: The hon. Gentleman is quite right about the inconsistency in all this. Is he aware that the Government have put out a press release today, saying:

“Shale gas developers could be required to consult local communities, even before submitting a planning application, following the launch of the latest government consultation”?

This is the most inconsistent, confusing thing that I have seen in all my 35 years in Parliament. The Government clearly do not know what is going on with it. They would be much better withdrawing all of this and sitting down with experts to talk about the issues around fracking and how they will affect constituencies such as mine, but it is quite clear that they are all over the place when it comes to consulting on this industrial process.

Mark Menzies: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

These concerns hold such significance for local people with local knowledge—these are not nimby. They are people who approach the issue in a very level-headed way, but they know that some of these sites are clearly not suitable. Under permitted development rights, however, developers can rock up, develop sites in the way that I have outlined, and people will feel done to. Even if a site was considered to be suitable, there is not the level of scrutiny involved to consider operational matters, traffic management plans and matters that could perhaps alleviate some of the visual impacts. Those would all be mitigating factors under a normal planning process, but that process is not what is being put on the table under this consultation and it is one of the reasons why I strongly oppose it.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that these concerns are being expressed by very ordinary general people? They are not organised protesters. They are people who live in these communities and they are fearful that their rural communities will become industrial.

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In recent years, the Government have put protections into areas of outstanding natural beauty. So, if the Government recognise that these developments are not acceptable for AONBs, what about the rest of the countryside? On the point about consistency, it is very important that we approach this issue in a sensible, constructive, well-planned way, and moving to permitted development is nothing short of irresponsible and downright bonkers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. When local authorities have developed policy based on their analysis of the impact that fracking will have, surely their voice counts, particularly when it is backed up by the voices of local people overwhelmingly saying that this activity will be a disaster for their local community?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) referred to some planning experiences that arose while working with North Yorkshire County Council in Kirby Misperton. The second consultation was about bringing shale gas production sites into the NSIP regime, and I can see some of the benefits of that.

One important aspect is getting consistency in decisions that are taken across the country. For example, in Kirby Misperton, there was a sensible addition: 400 metres, or half a mile, was added between the shale gas exploration site and residential properties. No such conditions were placed on either of the sites at Preston New Road, or on the application at Roseacre Wood. When planning inspectors are making those decisions—and they are different planning inspectors all the time—and those decisions are going up to the Secretary of State, inconsistent decisions are being made time after time.

Taking permitted development off the table—it is an absolutely crackers idea—I ask the Minister to look into how we can move to a planning regime where there is consistency, and where we avoid some of the decisions that go against local communities and that ignore traffic issues, population density, and the proximity of residential houses. I ask him to look at how we can come up with a workable framework. For example, there are no rules—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am hugely enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech, but the debate is only one hour long, and he has already had one third of the time. There are only 15 minutes of Back-Bench time remaining, and I have at least eight people seeking to speak, who are going to be speaking for under two minutes each. It is the hon. Gentleman’s debate, but he might want to think about bringing his remarks towards a close.

Mark Menzies: Mr Hollobone, your words are echoing in my ears. I will condense my remarks to allow other hon. Members in, but I have been very generous in taking interventions, as I hope you recognise. I will take one last intervention, and then make some progress.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, and on the powerful representations he is making on behalf of his community. Is he aware of the wider concern? The latest polling shows that just 18% of the public supports fracking. Many people are watching this debate, such as my constituent Etienne Stott—who is anything but ordinary—who asked me to attend the debate. He has said, “Can you tell the Minister that fracking is a terrible idea?” He does not want the Government to be able to bulldoze their misguided policy over local and global concerns. Does the hon. Gentleman understand why Mr Stott believes that?

Mark Menzies: I do indeed.

Mr Hollobone, let me plough on and bring my contribution to a conclusion. I ask the Minister to look at how consistency can be brought into the planning process. It is important that communities do not face years and years of uncertainty, and that we have consistency. It is also important that the industry knows where it stands. When that planning process is developed, it might well take lots of potential sites off the table altogether, so that the industry can stop wasting its time pursuing sites that, quite frankly, are not suitable.
Central Government’s involvement in recent years has brought some benefits. We have seen much more regulation and understanding of the industry, and I commend the Government on the creation of the Oil and Gas Authority. Indeed, that was something that I called for, campaigned for and pushed on right from the outset. We need an organisation that recognises that shale gas is very different, and that can pull together the work of the Health and Safety Executive, the Environment Agency, mineral rights authorities, BEIS, and other organisations. We need to create a level of expertise within Government that can help ensure that, if this industry develops, it does so in a safe way.

One of the changes that came in was a traffic light system—red, amber and green—and we have seen seismic events triggered at Preston New Road in recent days. Four of those events have been classed as red events, and have led to a cessation in activity. I put it to the Minister that for six years, the industry was not approaching me or anyone else to say that the threshold was far too low, but we now hear calls that a seismic event should need to be a 1.5 or a 2 to trigger a red event. I am sorry, but that ship has sailed. The industry had six years to make the case for that, and no case was made.

Bearing in mind your advice to allow other Members in, Mr Hollobone, I will conclude, because I know that many other people wish to speak in this important debate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30. I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokespeople at seven minutes past 5 for a five-minute contribution, then a five-minute contribution from Her Majesty’s Opposition, and then a 10-minute contribution from the Minister. Mr Menzies will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Eight Members are seeking to contribute, and we have 10 minutes left, so Members basically have one minute and 30 seconds each.

4.56 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will go on for as long as I can.

The Government’s proposals to fast track fracking are a shameful clampdown on local democracy and disregard the autonomy of residents and communities. Under the Government’s proposals, councils and residents will be deprived of a say on incredibly disruptive work being forced on their area. Communities have already been sidelined in the Government’s reckless pursuit of fracking. In my county of Lincolnshire, which is one of the areas most threatened by long-term fracking, £53 million of Lincolnshire County Council’s pension fund is invested in companies associated with shale gas development. The relationship between shale gas industries and Government officials at national and local levels threatens our democracy and our environment, and it must end.

Rather than imposing an unpopular and dangerous method of extraction on communities, the Government should follow Labour’s lead and commit to banning fracking outright, because shale gas is completely incompatible with this country’s climate commitments. The majority of fossil fuels will need to remain in the ground if we are to have even a chance of avoiding catastrophic temperature rises, and as a 2015 Government report found, fracking poses a uniquely damaging threat to our environment, including air pollution, water waste and earth tremors. At a time when we urgently need to transition to a green economy, the Government must abandon their senseless commitment to fracking, and stop their undemocratic assault on the power of communities and on local authorities.

4.57 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. My interest in this topic stems from the village of Marsh Lane in my constituency—a village of fewer than 1,000 people, who have been impacted by an application for exploratory drilling since the end of 2016. I started without any fixed view on fracking, but I stand here today to say that the proposal on permitted development and the proposal on NSIP are ludicrous and need to be stopped, and that fracking will not work in this country.

I am simply not clear from the consultation that has run over the summer about what the problem is, what we are trying to achieve, and how we will achieve it. Speaking as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the impact of shale gas, I can say that we have heard from a significant number of people that it will be technically extremely difficult, if not impossible, to confuse the planning process in the way the Government are proposing. I urge them to withdraw the proposal immediately, as did the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron)—he is a friend in this regard.

I am also unclear about what, as a country, we are seeking to achieve through fracking in general. The Government have not outlined any serious objectives beyond energy security, jobs and growth, and ultimately, price reductions. They have not made clear how any of those objectives can be achieved, and none of them can be achieved unless fracking is done at a scale that requires thousands of well pads, with a well pad in every village like Marsh Lane. People will not stand for it, and the proposal needs to be stopped.

4.59 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): My interest in this issue is that two thirds of our energy is produced from gas at present. Some 85% of households across the United Kingdom depend on gas for their heating and 65% depend on gas to cook their meals. Millions of jobs depend on having gas as an energy source, and we are increasingly dependent on imports. By 2030, 72% of our gas will have to be imported from places where we cannot guarantee supply or by routes where gas could be directed to other areas. With 50 years’ supply of gas already proven to be lying underneath the land of our country, it seems strange that we do not look for ways of ensuring we have that energy supply available to us.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: I do not have time. I believe that the Government’s proposals, such as for exploratory wells to fall under permitted development, are modest. If there is to be full exploitation, it has to go through the
full planning process. There are already other regulatory agencies that will oversee even the exploratory well process. On that basis, and on behalf of the millions of consumers across the United Kingdom who rely on gas, I trust that the Government’s sensible proposals will be adopted.

5 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing this debate. Let me be clear on two points: first, I am intensely sceptical about whether fracking is sensible at all, but secondly, I am very clear that the expansion of permitted development to circumvent the normal planning process is disproportionate and potentially counterproductive.

Environmentally, the starting point has to be that we should seek to keep fossil fuels in the ground. We have obligations under the Climate Change Act 2008. The only argument I have heard that gives some possible justification is the potential for fracking to be a bridging fuel so that we can phase out dirty coal as quickly as possible. The problem is that the science is as yet unproven. I will listen carefully to what the Minister has to say about whether that is a credible argument. The second and perhaps even more important point is that the principle must be that we should depart from the ordinary standards of consultation with local communities only in exceptional circumstances. That hurdle has not been jumped here.

The point has already been made about the inconsistency that exists. As someone who sat on a planning committee for a very long time, I know that the most serious applications ordinarily go through the local scrutiny procedure. There is no reason not to do so in these circumstances. I suggest that not to do so is dangerous and could be highly counterproductive.

5.2 pm

Jared O’Mara (Sheffield, Hallam) (Ind): Fracking is one of the No. 1 issues that my constituents email me about. That is why I am here speaking today. I receive more emails on it than on Brexit and the tree-felling programme in Sheffield, which is another environmental issue. One person said:

“I asked myself, ‘would I let my family live in a community with fracking?’ The answer is no. I therefore cannot recommend anyone else’s family to live in such a community either.”

That was not one of my constituents; that was Dr Howard Zucker, the commissioner of health for New York State. The New York State Department of Health concluded that fracking should be banned due to the significant public health risks. That led to a state-wide ban.

Some of the dangers that come with fracking include earthquakes, as we saw earlier this week with the 1.1 magnitude tremor at the Little Plumpton site in Lancashire. In Oklahoma, earthquakes rose from two a year to an average of two a day. One recent study has shown that in Pennsylvania, hospital admissions for cardiology and neurology are higher in counties with more fracking. A letter to the British Medical Journal earlier this year signed by Professor Hugh Montgomery, Dr Clare Gerada, Dr Sheila Adam and several other health professionals called for fracking to be halted due to the health risks. Numerous studies have highlighted significant risks. For example, a study in December 2014 found that fracking operations use and create chemicals linked to birth defects.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid more Members are standing, so the time limit is now one minute. I call Justin Madders.

Jared O’Mara: In that case, I will sum up. Those are just some reasons why my constituents.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has finished his contribution. I call Justin Madders.

5.4 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. People from many different communities and, as we have seen today, from different political persuasions have been united by the proposals. In my area, Labour, Conservative and independent councillors have voted unanimously to oppose the Government’s approach on fracking. We have an application in my area from IGas that has been rejected by the council and is going to review and appeal, but at least in that case there was a local process and local people had a say. The Government seem to have decided that in future, local people will have no voice at all.

Is there not real concern about the level of seismic events in Blackpool from just one well? Imagine how many events we would have if hundreds of wells were coming through that local people had no say about. Is that not a real concern? Local people should have an opportunity to have their concerns dealt with in a legitimate, open and transparent process. If we are truly going to take back control, that should mean a genuine democratic procedure, not a stitch-up that benefits private interests.

5.5 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Classifying fracking rigs under the banner of permitted development is a subversion of the planning process and therefore a subversion of local democracy. Permitted development was created for conservatories, small extensions and outhouses, none of which to the best of my knowledge have ever caused an earth tremor, yet we see fracking rigs potentially being given rights under permitted development, which is a cynical disgrace.

The subversion of the planning process works both ways, however. The proposed gas turbines at Old Hutton in my constituency are just a few hundred yards away from the local primary school. The development is just a fraction below the scale needed for national consideration. As we know, developers often do that to put pressure on a local planner, a local authority or local communities who might fear saying no because they cannot afford the cost of the appeal. When we are trying to tackle climate change and are on the cusp of catastrophic climate change, we need to ensure that all fossil fuels remain in the ground and back local authorities that oppose such things as the Old Hutton gas turbines and fracking.
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It was the test drilling in my constituency that first alerted me to the concerns of my constituents. There was test drilling going on in the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), and in Formby. Many have written to me with their concerns about what goes on in the local environment and near their homes. They feel that they should have a voice and be involved in the decision making.

Sefton Council unanimously opposes fracking—there will be no fracking approved by it—but the Government have overruled. That is simply not acceptable. We need alternatives to fracking. The science is there and the climate change effects are there. Members on the Government Benches have to oppose their Government when they make cuts to renewable energy. There must be an alternative to fracking, and it has to be renewables and hydrogen. That is the way forward, not supporting fracking.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee produced a report on 2 July where we opposed the permitted development approach and the nationally significant infrastructure project regime because we believed they would create more contention with local communities and give them less say. We opposed the NSIP regime because we had no evidence at all that it would expedite the process and also because it would destroy relationships between fracking applications and local plans, such as in North Yorkshire, where detailed guidance on fracking was put in the local plan. It would be completely redundant.

If the Minister looks at the two issues together, can he not see something fundamentally contradictory about the approach? It says at one stage of the planning process that fracking is so insignificant that permitted development should be allowed, but at the next stage it says that fracking is so important that it should be treated as a national infrastructure project. Surely the two are not compatible in the same sentence. Listen to Members of Parliament and allow councils to listen to their communities.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I represent a coalfield constituency in Lancashire, and fracking is unfortunately a particular and common concern for residents. Six licences have been imposed on the people of Leigh, who have serious and legitimate concerns about the impact on their environment. Despite the sentiments we often hear from the Government, we have reason to be concerned. Earlier this year, we heard from Peter Styles, a former Government adviser, who found that fracking in former coalmining areas increases the probability of earthquakes on faults that have already been subject to movement through mining.

Given that vulnerability, I hope that the Minister will be able in his reply to detail the steps he is taking to protect our community and that he will accept the real anxiety that fracking has caused in our region, which has been left feeling singled out by the Government’s fracking regime. Ultimately, it is totally unacceptable to impose such a chaotic process on communities without giving them a say.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I have to declare a non-financial interest: I am involved with local groups in my area.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing this timely, topical and extremely controversial debate. He always treats everything with a great sense of humour and great knowledge. He addressed the same problems that everybody brought up. Most Members agree that there is a huge problem, and recognised the confusion surrounding such developments. I particularly liked the point about local accidental activists becoming involved and becoming the voice for their communities. That is an essential point that we should all listen to.

I do not need to tell anyone that we in Scotland have some of the world’s greatest renewable resources. It is estimated that Scotland has one quarter of the entire offshore wind energy potential of the whole of Europe, and there are the same incredible figures for tidal energy. Those elements, when harnessed, can be seen as a blessing. That gives Members an understanding of why there is overwhelming support for renewables in Scotland, and why 99% of respondents to the Scottish Government’s consultation were diametrically opposed to fracking. That consultation received more than 60,000 responses in just four months. In my constituency and in the neighbouring constituency, Linlithgow and East Falkirk, there has been a long-standing and vigorous opposition to fracking.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning both our constituencies, which have a very long history with the shale industry, going back to the 1850s, with many communities built on the areas where there are deposits. There is clearly no support for fracking in our areas. Would it not be advisable for the UK Government to follow the lead of the Scottish Government and place a moratorium on all fracking?

John McNally: I totally agree. My hon. Friend and I have attended various meetings and screenings about the experiences of communities across the world caused by fracking. In February this year, the Dutch Government announced the end of gas exploration in the Netherlands. Companies have been given four years to end the extraction process. That decision followed a five-year moratorium on further development after Government-funded studies, importantly, revealed that drilling for gas in the natural gas fields had led to double the number of earthquakes.

Mike Amesbury: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McNally: I do not have time.

There was widespread property damage there and damage to flood defences. Residents have the right to sue the Government and gas field operators for damages. As of July 2017, there have been 80,000 damage claims totalling €1.2 billion.
[John Mc Nally]

Turning to a local debate, according to a recent article in The Blackpool Gazette, more than 30 earthquakes have been recorded in the last couple of weeks. Alarm bells should be ringing. Operations should be ceased, according to the local county council’s Labour group, which says that self-regulation is not working. I totally agree. Natascha Engel, the Government’s shale gas commissioner, has said that our laws are stricter than anywhere else in the world. I would advise Natascha to speak to the Dutch Economics Minister Eric Wiebes, who said:

“Shale gas is not an option in the Netherlands any more…It is over and done with.”

No law can be stricter than an outright ban.

Of the many events I attended in London and elsewhere before becoming an MP, I went to a screening of one film in particular that everybody should watch. It was called “The Bentley Effect” and was made by Stop Climate Chaos. The screening stands out in my mind. The film was shown to a packed hall in Falkirk Trinity Church and is about the experiences of communities in Australia. It is worth a look for anyone who has not seen it and who wants to see the impact on communities and how these things affect them immediately.

In Falkirk we were there at the very start of test drilling for fracking in Scotland. The people of Falkirk set up a properly constituted group, Concerned Communities of Falkirk, and have been running a campaign called Falkirk Against Unconventional Gas, setting out their objections in great detail. I mention that because I helped to draw up the community charter, expressing communities’ rights and responsibilities in participating in planning processes that could affect community assets.

Communities have been asking many serious questions that could be, and are, affected by fracking. I have only two uncomplicated questions, to which I would like to hear the Minister’s response. First, what would the Government do if house prices began to fall in the immediate area or the house market slowed down? Does the Minister have a plan to deal with that? Secondly, it is already known that insurance for farmers becomes unrealistic or can be denied. Can the Minister reassure farmers and growers that the Government will cover any loss of business due to perceived contamination of water to crops caused by fracking?

To conclude, the wishes of the Scottish people are being respected by the Scottish Government. The UK Government seem to have an obsession with fracking. Forget it!

5.14 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing the debate, which is obviously important and timely given the number of people in the Chamber.

Labour is totally opposed to fracking, and it will be interesting to see how the Minister, when he gets to his feet, defends the indefensible. The Government are becoming increasingly isolated on the topic. The following organisations have come out against fracking: Friends of the Earth, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace, the Woodland Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Senior scientists have also come out against fracking, and there is increasing medical evidence, particularly from the US, about the negative impact that it has on people’s health.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): As a Lancashire MP I was horrified by the Government’s decision to overturn Lancashire County Council’s decision to refuse permission for fracking. It flies in the face of the Government’s pretend localism agenda, and current attempts to meddle with the process do not pass the sniff test. My constituents oppose it. Perhaps the Tories should pinch another Labour policy and ban fracking.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I totally agree.

Despite the huge wealth of environmental, medical, geomorphological and other scientific evidence, the Government are ploughing ahead. Even the research of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy shows that just 16% of people support fracking—the lowest figure since it started collecting data five years ago. Greenpeace has commented that public opinion on fracking is in free-fall.

Gordon Marsden: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government cannot have it both ways? They say that they want a national regime, but when it comes to policing the drilling of fracking in Blackpool and the Fylde, they are refusing to pay the cost fully from Home Office resources, and are leaving it to Lancashire ratepayers.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an important point.

BEIS concludes that all the scientific evidence pertaining to possible risks of damage to the natural environment, the risk of contamination to the water supply, and safety concerns about earthquakes are to be dismissed. Try telling that to the people of Lancashire. They have had 18 earthquakes recently, each one increasing in seismic magnitude. Interestingly, the Government are telling local people who oppose fracking that they just need help to understand the process. It is exactly because they do understand it that they are concerned. The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth has said that she pities “any local councillor who gets an application on their desk, because they will shortly have a travelling circus of protestors to deal with”—[Official Report, 12 September 2018; Vol. 646, c.333WH].

Is that really how a Minister should respond to concerns of local people? I hope that the Minister today will distance himself from those comments.

I am not sure that the planning system should allow fracking at all, but I know that the permitted development system is not appropriate for dealing with the complexities of fracking, and neither is the nationally significant infrastructure project process. Both those aspects of the planning system totally ignore the voice of local people. Greenpeace has said that the fracking industry is pulling UK energy policy in entirely the wrong direction and that the public are right to be concerned, and I agree.

Many people in the Chamber might not know that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government today issued a further consultation document
on talking to people earlier in the planning process for fracking, as if that will stop them opposing it. I say to the Minister that that is just not going to cut it. The Government have to start listening to local people, change track and get planning policies that support renewables, not fracking.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for securing the debate. It is obvious that he and many Members have strong constituency interests in the topic and want to ensure, as I do, that local voices are heard as we consider the development of the shale gas industry in the UK.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No, because I want to leave time at the end for my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Fylde.

It is clear from my hon. Friend’s speech that the recent consultations are important and have excited a strong reaction from his constituents, from him and from other hon. Members. I emphasise that no decision has been made whether to bring the proposals forward. The consultations have now closed: the Government are considering the representations made and will issue a response in due course.

The consultations are part of a range of measures to make planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new shale gas development and ensure that local communities are fully involved in the planning decisions that affect them. Hon. Members will know that the Secretary of State has a quasi-judicial role in the planning system, so they will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment today on the detail of individual planning applications, on decisions on those applications, or on local plans. Hon. Members will also know that my remit as Housing Minister in relation to shale gas development is focused on planning policy and on delivering related manifesto commitments. However, given that many matters have been raised that are beyond my remit, I undertake to refer them to the appropriate Ministers, not least the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth.

Sir Greg Knight: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: I am afraid that I do not have time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde highlighted the importance of community engagement in the planning process. I reassure him that we remain fully committed to ensuring that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them, and to making planning decisions faster and fairer. Those are long-standing principles and I am adamant that we should stick to them. However, we understand that communities feel that they are often not consulted closely enough before planning applications are submitted to the local planning authority by developers. As my hon. Friend highlighted, that can lead to opposition to developments and a longer application process.

Engagement with communities at the pre-application stage gives local people a say earlier in the planning process and makes developers aware of issues of importance to the community that may need to be resolved. The planning system in the UK already provides an extensive legislative framework for community involvement, but I believe there is scope to do more. We have therefore published a consultation on whether applicants should be required to conduct a pre-application consultation with the local community prior to submitting a planning application for shale gas development. We believe that that could further strengthen the role that local people play in the process, and we are keen to hear the voices of industry and of communities. The consultation also seeks views on the process of community consultation that should be required and on the stages of shale gas development that should be covered. It closes on 7 January, and I urge everybody to contribute to it.

Let me move on to the potential changes to permitted development rights. Over the summer, we consulted on whether permitted development rights should be expanded to include shale gas exploration development, and on the circumstances in which those proposals might be appropriate. I make it clear that any potential permitted development right granted for shale gas exploration would not apply to hydraulic fracturing operations or to the production stage of shale gas extraction. I also emphasise that any permitted development right covers only the planning aspects of the development; it does not remove requirements under the regulatory regimes of the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Oil and Gas Authority.

It is important to note that all permitted development rights contain specific exemptions, conditions and restrictions to control and mitigate the impact of the development and protect local amenity. Any potential permitted development right for shale gas exploration would be no exception; for example, it could specify limits on the height of any structure, areas where a permitted development right would not apply, or noise and operation controls. The consultation has sought views on that issue.

In relation to the role that local communities and mineral planning authorities can play within the permitted development rights regime, our consultation also sought views on whether MPAs should be able to conduct a prior approval process to consider specific elements of a development before works can proceed. Such a process can include a requirement for public consultation. It would also enable local consideration of key matters.

There is currently no commercial production from any hydraulically fractured shale gas resources in the UK. However, we believe that it is vital to look ahead and understand how best to manage planning permissions for a future state in which shale gas is produced. We therefore also consulted over the summer on whether the production phase of shale gas developments should be brought within the nationally significant infrastructure projects, which many hon. Members have referred to. The consultation particularly sought to understand what the appropriate triggers and criteria could be for including production projects in the NSIP regime.

I emphasise that community engagement is fundamental to the NSIP regime’s operation. Pre-application consultation with the local community and with local authorities is a statutory requirement. Developers are required to consult...
extensively before an application is submitted and considered, and where the consultation has not been carried out in line with the statutory requirements, the Planning Inspectorate can refuse to accept an application. Local authorities and communities also have the right to be involved during the examination of a project; they can set out their views in written representations, which will then be taken into account in decision making.

Both consultations ran for 14 weeks and closed on 25 October. The Government are analysing the representations made and will publish a response in due course. Should we take forward the proposals, we have committed to conducting further consultations on the detail of the proposed changes. No doubt this debate will provide valuable feedback into that process.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde again for securing this valuable debate. We remain fully committed to ensuring that local communities are properly involved in planning decisions that affect them, and to making planning decisions faster and fairer. As part of that, as I said, we have launched a further consultation today on whether applicants should be required to conduct pre- application consultation with the local community. We have also delivered on our manifesto promises to consult on how best to develop our planning processes for exploration and production of shale gas development while ensuring that communities remain fully involved. We are considering the responses from the consultations and will respond in due course.

5.25 pm

Mark Menzies: I thank the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), for the way in which they have approached the debate. To me, the most important thing is making sure that local people’s voices are heard. It is also important that we have a planning system that works. At the moment, there is a concern that local voices may not be heard.

Rosie Cooper: Is the hon. Gentleman confident that more consultation will produce anything? When the consultation took place in Lancashire, local people, communities and elected representatives were ignored and the Minister overturned the decision.

Mark Menzies: Let us not prejudge the outcome of the consultation. Let us hope that the Minister and the Government have listened to the concerns expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and let us see what comes out of the consultation.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Menzies: Not at the moment; I am very conscious that I took a lot of interventions earlier, and I want to draw my speech to a close.

It is very important that we have a shale gas planning system that is functional, that works, that allows people to know where they stand, and that is not full of the kind of inconsistencies that we are currently seeing. I do not believe that having application after application determined by the Planning Inspectorate is the route forward. The planning system is far from perfect; in some cases it is causing extreme distress to local communities such as Roseacre Wood, which still has a decision hanging over it after more than four years.

I want a planning system that takes account of wider issues such as traffic management plans and proliferation, so that we do not get a high density of well pads popping up across an area. I want a planning system that recognises, as has happened in Kirby Misperton, that a limit has to be set with respect to residential properties. We need to put such restrictions on the industry because there are swathes of the country that may well contain shale gas but that are not appropriate for developing it.

I promise the Minister that I will continue to work constructively with the Government, as I have over the past eight years, to make sure that the voices of local people are heard and that decisions are taken in a positive and sensible way. In that light, I have to tell him that moving to permitted development sits so uncomfortably. It jars with everything that I believe in and hope the Government believe in.

Chris Green: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mark Menzies: Yes, and if my hon. Friend is very quick, I will also give way to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock).

Chris Green: Surely permitted development should be rejected if we are to respect local knowledge, local democracy and the Government’s own devolution agenda.

Mark Menzies: Indeed.

Stephanie Peacock: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth recently admitted that she had not yet visited a fracking site? The people I represent in Barnsley want their voices heard. They do not want fracking; they want the Government to listen to them.

Mark Menzies: I am conscious of time, so I will let those comments stand.

I will finish by asking the Government to listen to the views of local people and accept that the current planning system is dysfunctional when it comes to shale gas applications. I will also say that the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) was brave to advocate shale gas; as I said at the outset, there are many views in this debate. However, the one thing that is very clear is that permitted development is not the way forward. The planning system needs to be fixed, and I hope the Minister is the man to do it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered local involvement in shale gas development.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 November 2018

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM in the Chair]

Prison Health

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I would like to present a report on “Prison health” by the Select Committee on Health and Social Care. I start by thanking my fellow Committee members and the Committee staff, particularly Huw Yardley and Lewis Pickett. I also particularly thank all those who gave evidence to our inquiry, both in person and in writing. We visited HMP Isis, HMP Belmarsh and HMP Thameside, and I thank the staff, healthcare staff and all the people in prison who spoke to us about their experiences.

A prison sentence is a deprivation of liberty, not a sentence to poorer health or healthcare, yet sadly that was the picture that we found in our inquiry. Too many prisoners are still in overcrowded, unsanitary prisons as the picture that we found in our inquiry. Too many of them speak to us about their experiences.

Too many prisoners still die in custody or shortly after their release. Although deaths in custody have fallen slightly since peaking in 2016 as a result of increased suicides, so-called natural-cause deaths are the highest cause of mortality in prisons and, I am afraid, reflect serious lapses in care. Every suicide should be regarded as preventable. It is simply unacceptable that those known to be at risk face unacceptable delays while awaiting transfer to more appropriate settings. We see that happen time and again, without appropriate action being taken.

Our report refers to the impact of the increasingly widespread use of novel psychoactive substances, not just on prisoners but on prison staff; dealing with violent incidents takes time away from the work that we would otherwise expect prison staff to do. We heard time and again from people in prison who were being able to attend appointments, either within or outside the prison, because there simply were not the staff there, because they had been diverted to other cases.

We have made recommendations for the National Prison Healthcare Board. We would like it to agree a definition of equivalent care, and to tackle the health inequalities that we know prisoners face. It also needs to take a more comprehensive and robust approach to identifying and dealing with the healthcare needs of people in prison. However, many of our recommendations will not be met until sufficient prison officers are in post. That is an overriding issue, because the cut in prison officer numbers—I know the Government are starting to address that—lies at the root of so many problems in our jails.

Health, wellbeing, care and recovery need to be a core part of the Government’s plans for prison reform. It is in all our interests to care about the health and wellbeing of prisoners, because they will later be back in our communities. If more of them become dependent on drugs during their time in prison, and these problems worsen, they will come back into our communities with even worse health issues, health inequalities and mental health problems. I know it is difficult, because it sometimes seems that the public do not care about our prisoners, but it is absolutely in everybody’s interest to care about the health and wellbeing of our prison population.

I am afraid that our report highlights a system in which, time and again, reports from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons are not acted on. We need those reports to have real teeth, and for people to be able to take action, or to be held accountable for not taking action. We heard time and again of governors not having the levers—even if they had the financial powers—to take the necessary action.

We call on the Government to regard the health of our prison population as a serious public health crisis requiring a whole-systems approach that takes root in sentencing and release, making sure that people are only in prison if absolutely necessary, that those with serious mental health problems are transferred in a timely manner and that sees time in prison as an opportunity to act and to address serious health inequalities. That is not only in their interest but in all our interests.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given the picture the hon. Lady just described, she will be aware of the serious problems in Exeter Prison, which the staff there are doing their utmost to try to address. Does she agree that, as we face voting on the Budget later this afternoon, it might have been better, rather than giving tax cuts to the richest 10%, for the Chancellor to spend that money on helping our prisons to deliver the kind of services that she would like to see?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution towards the report. He identifies that this is an area that is often deprioritised in favour of other issues. However, we absolutely have to prioritise the health of our prison population. I agree that we should address staffing levels. We should also look at the health and wellbeing of our prison staff. Too many leave because of the pressures and the violence that they face in prison.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Although a disproportionate number of prisoners are young males, as the hon. Lady will know, the prison population is ageing, with more much older prisoners serving custodial sentences than previously. What observations did her Committee make of healthcare provision for that ageing prisoner population, and what does she think the Government need to do to make sure that those people are properly cared for?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Lady. Lady for drawing attention to that. Our report mentions that the prison population is ageing, particularly as a result of older sex offenders coming into our jails. It is about dealing not
only with healthcare in our prisons but with social care.

We call on the Government to look specifically at how we commission for that age group and their special needs. She will also know that the average age of death in prison is 56. We really have to look at the excess mortality, which is 50% higher for people in prison than for the background population.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Henry. I very much welcome my hon. Friend's statement and the report, in which I thank her for involving Select Committee on Justice. The evidence that she received entirely mirrors that which the Justice Committee is receiving for our inquiry into the make-up of the prison population in 2022. Does she agree that it is absolutely essential that we turn around the inadequate provision of health services across our prison estate, not only because it is morally right but because it is impossible to effectively rehabilitate people when there is endemic ill health in many parts of the prison population? That means that people are discharged back into the community often in poor health and leads to a cycle of reoffending that costs the community more, as well as destroying and blighting lives.

Dr Wollaston: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend said and I welcome the ongoing interest that the Justice Committee is taking in this issue. He will know that one very depressing aspect of this situation is that report after report is published highlighting the issue, but we are just not seeing the progress needed. There needs to be real accountability and consequences for progress not being made on all these issues.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We all know that the suicide rate in prisons has increased markedly, but also, because of ageing prisoners and addiction problems, more people are dying. Was the Health and Social Care Committee able to assess whether the standards of healthcare mean that people go into prison and simply do not come out?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The point is that if someone goes into prison with a serious underlying medical problem, it is simply unacceptable that they cannot access the healthcare that they should be receiving. That is what we heard time and again: people's appointments are cancelled, issues are not addressed and things are not followed up. Sometimes an outside appointment with a specialist, for very serious conditions at times, will simply be cancelled, and then there is no continuity and follow-up, so the person simply falls out of the system. Undoubtedly, therefore, people's health is suffering and, as I said at the beginning, no one is sentenced to worse healthcare when they are sentenced to deprivation of their liberty. The situation is unacceptable.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady not just for her presentation today, but for so ably chairing the inquiry. Her presentation put across very eloquently the fact that we put in prison a population of people who are very unhealthy already, but unfortunately our prison environment makes them even less healthy for two reasons. One is the prison environment that they are in, which is very unhealthy. The second is prison health services. Despite some excellent prison health services that really work, we found that on the whole prison health services are not adequate. The hon. Lady has already talked about the need for accountability and consequences. Can she say something about the role that we recommend the Care Quality Commission might play in that?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his own really important role in the course of our inquiry. He highlights the point about the CQC. The CQC has no powers of entry into our prisons. We now know that it can carry out unannounced inspections just about anywhere else, but it cannot in prisons. The other challenge that it faces is being able to take a whole-system approach to the way services are commissioned. We heard from it again, in relation to a separate inquiry, earlier this week that it would like to have the powers independently to look at a whole-system approach, rather than just very narrowly looking at one aspect of it. It was very clear to us that a whole-system public health approach needs to be taken to the commissioning and provision of healthcare.

The hon. Gentleman's other point was about the conditions in our jails. Keeping people in conditions where there are broken windows, cockroach infestations and so on is wholly unacceptable. No one should be living in those conditions in Britain today.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs is undertaking an ongoing inquiry into the prison estate in Wales, and one issue that has been raised is the fact that health is of course devolved, but there appears to be relatively little consideration of how health is managed differently there from how it is managed in English prisons—of the difference between Wales and England. There is a particular anomaly with the only private prison in Wales, the question of answerability to the health ombudsman, and to whom actually that prison is answerable. Has the hon. Lady made any assessment of accountability between the Welsh and English regimes and to what degree we should perhaps be measuring the difference between health provision in prisons in Wales and that in England?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. We did not look at devolved issues, because the remit of the Health and Social Care Committee is England only, but the hon. Lady makes a very important point. As the Justice Committee has an ongoing interest in this issue, there might be an opportunity for that Committee to take the matter up more quickly than we would be able to, but I would be very interested if the hon. Lady wanted to write to me about it.

I again thank all those who contributed to the inquiry, and I look forward to hearing the ongoing thoughts of the Justice Committee.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Would the Minister like to say anything?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Thank you, Sir Henry. I really welcome the report. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) alluded to the fact that this
issue lies within the bailiwicks of both the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice; I am glad that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), is here beside me. We are seized of the importance of this issue and recognise that silo culture is often the enemy of good policy making. Rest assured that we will take away the report and reflect on it. We are very grateful for the interest that the Health and Social Care Committee has shown in this very important subject, because we do need to do a whole lot better.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the Minister for those words.
Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), that cuts to prisons are causing serious deterioration in the health and welfare of prisoners. We should not be surprised. The Ministry of Justice budget will be cut by almost half in little more than a decade of continuing austerity. It is the biggest cut to any Department, and it is a relatively small Department, with only three major areas of spend. Inevitably, all three areas—not only prisons and probation and the courts service, but legal aid—are going through debilitating change. My first request to the Minister is that she tackle the funding issue head on. No one is saying that all the cuts since 2010 will be reversed, or that the clock will be turned back, but if the Government wish to honour their stated objectives for LASPO, and in particular, “To target legal aid at those who need it most”, they must put something extra in the pot.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will remember when we sat on the Bill Committee and warned of the intended and potentially unintended consequences of the cuts and changes being made. Does he agree that the nightmare for people desperately in need of legal aid for everything from housing to medical negligence cases has been worse than expected, and that justice has certainly been denied to them?

Andy Slaughter: Yes. I will come on to the actual, rather than the predicted, effect of LASPO. Without spoiling the surprise, we will find that the Government have overachieved in cutting budgets and underachieved in every other respect.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Before my hon. Friend moves on, will he give way on that point?

Andy Slaughter: Of course I will give way to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice.

Mr Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is those very vulnerable people who find themselves feeling that they have been victims of miscarriages of justice? The Criminal Cases Review Commission was at our meeting yesterday and it explained that a lack of resources inhibits its ability to process the number of cases it would like to. The cuts in legal aid mean that many people are faced with representing themselves in very complex situations.

Andy Slaughter: That is not something we discussed during the passage of LASPO, because the impact on criminal law seemed relatively mild compared with the effect on civil law, but that came afterwards. Now, eligibility restrictions and the reduced availability of legal aid practitioners as a result of cuts mean that people often go into court unrepresented, even in quite serious matters, which of course increases the risk of miscarriages of justice.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend agree that the impact of the Government’s policies has not fallen evenly on all members of the population and that women have been particularly affected? Often, they will represent themselves and be repeatedly brought back to court by a perpetrator, perhaps their ex-partner, and have to face the trauma all over again. That has been a particularly damaging result of the changes introduced by the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling).

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Rightly, more attention has been focused on domestic violence than on perhaps any other single issue. Although changes have been made, they are nugatory as far as the Government are concerned. In many cases, women are still being victimised because of the changes that LASPO introduced, against the assurances given at the time.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I am concerned about the impact on sick and disabled people. In some cases, up to 90% of social security claimants on the employment and support allowance, the personal independence payment or the disability living allowance have been denied access to support as a result of the cuts, but 70% of people who go on to challenge the decision, in person or with a welfare advocate, will be successful in their claim. Is that not a real injustice?

Andy Slaughter: The figures speak for themselves. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am responding to a series of powerful interventions. Across the board, matter starts have gone down from more than 900,000 at their peak in 2010, to about 140,000 in the past year. That is a dramatic fall, but in some areas, such as welfare benefits, the decline has been even sharper.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that the absence of legal aid funding has driven legal aid solicitors and not-for-profit providers out of the market, which has left the door open to cowboy providers? They purport to be able to offer advice on immigration cases, for example, but that advice is poor quality, unreliable and, frankly, inaccurate, as I see repeatedly in my constituency.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend raises that issue from a position of knowledge, as she used to serve on the magistrates bench. There is a deskillling of the professions because of the decline in the number of practitioners who can secure funds. Although informal and non-legal advice, such as that from McKenzie friends, can play its part, too often it is stepping in where proper professional legal advice is needed and, as my hon. Friend has said, it is too often being done by people who are, effectively, rogues.

It becomes wearing to hear Minister after Minister repeat the mantra that legal aid is an important part of our legal system and that all individuals must have access to justice, without ensuring that the resources are there to allow that to happen. That is a disconnect. Although I welcome the remit and engagement of the LASPO review, the feedback from those who have met the Department suggests that little action will follow the warm words we have heard. More specifically, this week’s Budget confirmed that the Department will continue to make hundreds of millions of pounds of cuts over the next five years, some of which will inevitably come from the legal aid budget. The Minister must realise that that is unsustainable and incompatible with her stated support for legal aid.
Let me try to make it easy for the Minister to say yes. In garnering public support for this debate, More United specified three asks to put to the Government to deal with some of the worst consequences of LASPO, which were: access to early advice, access to welfare advice and simpler criteria for obtaining legal aid.

Those will not be unfamiliar requests to the Minister, but they encapsulate solutions to three major and predicted calamities of LASPO. First, cutting early advice means problems fail to get sorted while they are small and manageable, with worse consequences to the individual and the state down the line. Secondly, taking welfare advice out of scope leaves those people who need help most struggling. Thirdly, restrictive and complex eligibility criteria have become an effective way of stopping even those of very limited means getting access to what legal aid is still available.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. During the passage of the Bill, the Government said that they believed that withdrawing legal aid for family matters would increase mediation, but research shows a 56% decrease in mediation. The Law Society says that early advice from a solicitor was a significant source of referrals to mediation in family matters. I agree with that, and I wonder if my hon. Friend does too.

Andy Slaughter: Yes. I will come on to mediation. My hon. Friend highlights two points: first, the lack of early advice and its consequences, and secondly, that the so-called alternatives put in place by the Government have failed, so we are left with effectively no safety net.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is starting to build up quite a case on the issue. Sally Denton, a senior solicitor at the Nottingham Law Centre, made precisely that point about the importance of early advice:

“Given the massive changes to the benefit system coupled with the evidence that most people presenting as homeless to the local authority are doing so following the end of a private tenancy and the massive crisis in homelessness it is clear that failing to enable authority are doing so following the end of a private tenancy and the evidence that most people presenting as homeless to the local

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend is doing quite well so far. I think he is starting to build up quite a case on the issue. Sally Denton, a senior solicitor at the Nottingham Law Centre, made precisely that point about the importance of early advice:

“Given the massive changes to the benefit system coupled with the evidence that most people presenting as homeless to the local authority are doing so following the end of a private tenancy and the massive crisis in homelessness it is clear that failing to enable authority are doing so following the end of a private tenancy and the evidence that most people presenting as homeless to the local

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend identifies the fact that by pulling away parts of the legal aid structure, the whole thing has collapsed in many areas. It is often the case that one problem, which may be housing or debt, is caused by another solvable problem, which is the lack of welfare benefits. Because they are not in receipt of welfare benefits, someone who would otherwise be eligible for legal aid may not qualify under the eligibility rules, and therefore the whole thing spirals down.

As I was saying, I have three specific requests. There are other discrete issues that I wish to mention and I will say a bit more about those in a minute, but I would like some indication from the Minister, when she responds to the debate, that at least these three specific requests are being considered as part of the review.

LASPO was billed as having four objectives, “to discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at public expense; to target legal aid at those who need it most; to make significant savings to the cost of the scheme; and to deliver better overall value for money for the taxpayer.”

The Ministry of Justice predicted that the budget for the legal aid bill would be cut by £350 million. It promised that there would be innovative ways in which advice and legal services would be offered, allowing costs to be cut while still maintaining access to justice.

There was, however, little of substance. Instead, LASPO swept away 60 years of the development of legal aid, taking almost all private family law and most of social welfare law out of scope, introducing onerous restrictions on eligibility, and turning on its head the principle of a right to advice and representation. Now, matters would be eligible for legal aid only if expressly allowed by the schedule to the Act.

Later, criminal legal aid got the LASPO treatment. It did not feature in any detail in the original Bill, but subsequent secondary legislation introduced cuts of a similar scale for crime, opening up the prospect of advice deserts and, as we have already touched on, miscarriages of justice, where defendants do not meet eligibility criteria but cannot afford representation.

Catherine West: On the narrow point of advice deserts, does my hon. Friend agree that some London boroughs are appreciative of the Bar’s pro bono unit and the free representation it offers, and indeed, in my borough’s case, of the St James’s Church Legal Advice Centre in Muswell Hill, where the excellent Peter Thompson, who is not 21 anymore but still gives legal free aid, works? However, access to justice is a genuine issue in other parts of the country, where retired solicitors are simply unable to provide that kind of support.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. First, however good pro bono services are, they cannot replace legal aid and it would be wrong to say that they could. Secondly, I will give an example of a letter I received in preparation for this debate, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—who is in attendance and is himself a distinguished solicitor—may want to comment on. It says that in north Wales only two firms are contracted to do mental health work, in an area with eight hospitals with mental health services, and only one firm is doing community care—that is, social and health care law. That situation is far from typical.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab) rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I think the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has prompted an intervention.

Ian C. Lucas: I am grateful for the prompt from my hon. Friend; I was being a little cautious, compared with my colleagues. The dearth of advice in Wrexham, which is the largest town in north Wales, has a real impact. Even worse, until my last-minute intervention the Conservative-Independent coalition that runs the council was going to close our local citizens advice bureau. There is virtually no advice available. My constituency office has had to take on an extra caseworker to provide advice in the biggest town in north Wales.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend reminds me to touch on the effect on Members of Parliament, which I am sure we are all interested in.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Most advice centres are experiencing staff reductions and are underfunded. That much is clear with regard to issues such as housing and immigration. Does he agree that that is a disgrace, to say the least?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree. Pre-LASPO, my own law centre employed eight solicitors across a range of, mainly, social welfare law, but now it can afford to employ only two solictors. It is only through the generosity of the local Labour council—against the backdrop of its own budget cuts—and that of charitable trusts that it is able to top up that number with further practitioners. Even the previous position, however, was insufficient for the need, as I well know, and the current position is almost unsustainable.

Alex Cunningham: Mencap mentions very specifically in its briefing the distress faced by people with disabilities who cannot get the support they need, and who drop out of the social security and care system because there is no one to speak for them. Even if they qualify for assistance, they cannot find the specialist lawyers they need. Mencap says that this is happening across the country. Does he agree that the Minister needs to look at increasing provision, and also needs to assess whether the necessary specialist lawyers are available in the system to help people?

Andy Slaughter: That is particularly important to my hon. Friend and he makes a very good point. We have been briefed by both Mencap and Mind on today’s debate. It will not surprise anyone that Mind said that people with mental health problems are twice as likely as members of the general population to experience legal problems and four times as likely to experience complex legal problems—in other words, problems that extend across a number of different disciplines. As was predicted, those are the people who are worst affected.

Even as the Bill was being published, alarm bells were being rung, and not only by Opposition Members. I had the pleasure of leading for the Opposition in Committee on LASPO. We heard not only from experts and users of the system but from the Government officials. The impact assessments that accompanied the Bill predicted that people with protected characteristics would be disproportionately affected by the cuts.

The official MOJ line was: “The wide-ranging availability of legal aid can lead people to assume legal action is their only option, even where early practical advice could be of more help to them and avoid them needing a lawyer at all.”

Gillian Guy, the chief executive of Citizens Advice, said the money available was not enough and that we were losing precisely the swift and practical advice offered by CABs and advice and law centres. She added that Citizens Advice research suggested that every £1 spent on early advice saved around £9 later, partly by avoiding unnecessary and expensive tribunal hearings.

Richard Hawkes, the chief executive of Scope, said: “To cut legal aid at a time of unprecedented changes to welfare support would mean disabled people who fall foul of poor decision-making, red tape or administrative error being pushed even further into poverty as they struggle to manoeuvre the complicated legal system without the expert support they need...This could result in a ticking timebomb of poorly prepared and lengthy tribunals and appeals, choking the courts and not saving money, but actually costing the government far more in the long term.”

The Government were warned. Did the predictions of doom come to pass? We know that they did. In fact, LASPO has cut far more deeply than had been billed. The stated aim was to reduce the legal aid budget by £350 million, but last year spending was £950 million less than in 2010, at £1.6 billion, as against £2.55 billion in 2010-11, with similar percentage falls in both civil and criminal legal aid.

While waiting for the Government review of LASPO—it was promised for between three and five years post-enactment, but we are now nearer six years post-enactment—we have not been short of expert opinion on its effects. Reports by the Justice Committee, the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, the Bar Council, the Law Society, the Bach Commission and the Low Commission have been consistent in highlighting the serious failings of LASPO. In 2017, the Bach Commission found that “the justice system is in crisis. Most immediately, people are being denied access to justice because the scope of legal aid has been dramatically reduced and eligibility requirements made excessively stringent. But problems extend very widely through the justice system, from insufficient public legal education and a shrinking information and advice sector to unwieldy and creaking bureaucratic systems and uncertainty about the future viability of the practice of legal aid practitioners.”

In 2015, the Justice Committee published its verdict: “Our overall conclusion was that, while it had made significant savings in the cost of the scheme, the Ministry had harmed access to justice for some litigants and had not achieved the other three out of four of its stated objectives for the reforms. Since the reforms came into effect there has been an underspend in the civil legal aid budget because the Ministry has not ensured that many people who are eligible for legal aid are able to access it. A lack of public information about the extent and availability of legal aid post-reforms, including about the Civil Legal Advice telephone gateway for debt advice, contributed to this and we recommend the Ministry take prompt steps to redress this.”

Advice officers around the UK began looking for alternative sources of funding so that they could continue working with clients who would soon find themselves ineligible for legal aid. However, with local authority budgets cut, few sources of funding were available. Many agencies closed and private firms found that it was no longer economic to undertake legal aid work. As we have heard, whole areas of help have been removed from scope, leaving millions unable to get advice or representation. There has been an almost complete collapse in early legal advice. That means that cases now escalate and are resolved only after becoming much more complex, traumatic and expensive, if they are resolved at all.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) said, the Government argued that removing legal aid for most private family law matters would increase the uptake of mediation so families could resolve their problems outside court. They predicted an increase of 9,000 mediation assessments and 10,000 mediation cases for the year 2013-14. Instead, there was a decrease of 17,246 mediation assessments in the year after the reforms, and the number of mediation cases fell by 5,177 in the same period. One reason for that was the withdrawal of firms from those areas of law, leaving no one to signpost litigants to mediation.
The removal of legal aid from most areas of family law has had a disproportionate effect on women. In a survey carried out by Rights of Women and Women’s Aid, 53% of respondents took no action in relation to their case because they could not apply for legal aid. It is becoming so difficult for victims of domestic violence to obtain legal aid that last year, the Government were forced urgently to review the criteria for legal aid in such cases. Time limits preventing victims of domestic violence from obtaining legal aid for court hearings were scrapped and rules were relaxed to accept evidence from victim support organisations. Despite that, there are still concerns that too many women are falling through the cracks and not getting the help they need.

A dramatic increase in litigants in person following LASPO has created a severe strain on the court system which, to quote the retiring Director of Public Prosecutions this week, is already “creaking” under the effects of significant cuts and court closures.

Ian C. Lucas: My hon. Friend touches on an important and under-appreciated point. The court system is struggling to cope with litigants in person and the judiciary, whose role it is to judge cases, is having to take on the advice aspect of the justice system. It is difficult to combine that advisory role with providing impartial judicial functions.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend knows his business well. That is self-evidently true, and the judiciary is responding magnificently, but we are asking those people, whether in tribunals, magistrates courts, or the higher courts, effectively to do two jobs. They are asked both to be inquirers and to represent parties—sometimes one party and sometimes both—as well as perform their ordinary functions. That is simply unsustainable in the long term.

Litigants in person can struggle to understand court procedures and their legal entitlements, and cases involving them take longer to resolve. The Personal Support Unit reports that, in 2010-11, its staff and volunteers helped people without access to a lawyer on about 7,000 occasions. By 2017-18, that number had rocketed to more than 65,000. The removal of most welfare benefits law from the scope of legal aid—which, again, we have touched on—has disproportionately affected disabled people. The number of benefits disputes cases with legal aid has fallen by 99% compared with pre-LASPO levels, from 29,801 cases in 2011-12 to 308 in 2016-17. When individuals are able to challenge benefits decisions, the majority of those decisions are overturned. Since 2013, 63% of appeals against personal independence payment decisions and 60% of appeals against employment and support allowance decisions were decided in the claimant’s favour.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend is something of a historian in legal matters. Who was it—it may have been H.R. Greaves in his first lecture at the London School of Economics—who said:

“In England, justice is open to all—like the Ritz Hotel”?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but I think he means that I have been around for too long.

Many Members will have seen the results of LASPO in their surgeries and I am grateful to colleagues for raising this point. Half of the MPs who responded to a survey carried out by the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid said that the volume of constituency casework had increased over the past year. More than half said they had seen a notable increase in the complexity of their casework. Many MPs said that political issues in their constituencies had closed, meaning that those MPs were no longer able to refer constituents onwards to get the help they needed. Some MPs even said that citizens advice bureaux were referring constituents to them because the bureaux were unable to cope with the number of people seeking help.

Fearful of falling foul of human rights law, LASPO introduced exceptional case funding. The Government projected that 5,000 to 7,000 such exceptional cases would be funded per year, but only 954 people benefited from that scheme in 2017. In almost every aspect, the consequences of LASPO have been as bad as predicted or worse, and the mitigating measures have not worked.

Unlike my constituents, the Government are not short of advice on what to do. In particular, I commend the 25 recommendations in the Bach Commission report. Those include changes to scope and eligibility; a simplification of the current rules, including for criminal matters; reform of exceptional funding; and better access to existing services, including more face-to-face advice. That report also suggests solutions to other issues of concern. The restrictions on legal aid for judicial review, the lack of representation at inquests for the deceased’s family, and the complicity of the Legal Aid Agency in refusing legal aid in cases that are embarrassing to Government, such as the prisoner book ban, are all subject to recommendations in that report. Those are serious issues, not just of inequality of arms, but of manipulation of resources by Government to avoid proper scrutiny of their actions. I hope the Minister has time to respond on those issues. If not, I suspect we will be debating them again before too long.

Many Members wish to speak, so I will conclude by reiterating our main asks for today. The first is to restore access to early advice. Lack of early advice means that simple problems are left to escalate. Larger problems cost more money to fix. Lack of early housing law advice on disrepair issues can lead to health, social and financial problems, the tab for which will ultimately be picked up by the NHS and local authorities. Prevention is better than cure. A recent report commissioned for the Law Society found that restoring early legal help would save the taxpayer money.

Secondly, we ask that the Government restore access to welfare advice. Welfare benefits law is labyrinthine, and that system is particularly difficult to navigate for people who are disabled. Recent social security reforms have led to a steep rise in inaccurate decisions and benefit sanctions. Thousands of disabled people have been left to challenge unlawful decisions without legal assistance. How many more unfair decisions would be overturned if people who had been treated unlawfully by the Department for Work and Pensions could access welfare advice?

Thirdly, we ask that the Government simplify the criteria for those who need legal aid. The Government should consider a significantly simpler and more generous scheme. The means test should be based on a simple assessment of gross household income, excluding an adjustment for family size. In 1980, civil legal aid was available to 80% of the country. Today, that figure is thought to be under 20%. Ordinary working people
who are just about managing are now considered too rich to be eligible for legal aid. Pensioners are among those worst affected by the outdated means test—even modest savings disqualify them from legal aid. The effect is that a vulnerable pensioner unlawfully denied basic care may well have to pay for a lawyer out of their own pocket. Legal aid does not only fund a lawyer, but provides protection from paying the other side’s costs.

I have been sent a huge number of individual case studies. For reasons of time, I am not going to be able to go through all of them—I would be happy to supply them to the Minister, but I am sure she is aware of the problems that arise. I have seen some heartbreaking cases involving mental capacity. Often, elderly people are removed from their own homes, sometimes forcibly, and are unlawfully detained by local authorities. They wish to go back to their homes and to criticise the conditions in which they are being kept, but because they have equity in their property which, frankly, they have no chance of raising money on, they are unable to challenge the decision. That is a fundamental breach of people’s human rights.

Cases such as those should make the Minister think again. I therefore ask her to put her well-thumbed, prepared text aside, because it does not—not—I know, having heard it earlier this week—address the specific point that I and others highlight in this debate. As a distinguished lawyer, I know she wants to ensure access to justice for all. She knows that even the best justice system is worth nothing only if it is open to anyone to use it. The requests I have made would go some way to restoring that access. I hope we get a positive response today and when the review reports next month.

2.20 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I start by referring to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this debate on a very important topic.

I make no bones about approaching this debate with a rather personal stake. Before I came to this place, the whole of my working life had been as a barrister practising in the criminal courts, almost invariably publicly funded by legal aid to defend or by the Crown Prosecution Service or the Serious Fraud Office to prosecute. I hope I can recognise that this is not merely an academic matter. These things affect the lives of every one of our constituents and every Member of this House, regardless of party. I hope I will be able to approach the debate in that spirit.

It is a long history that we have to review. LASPO is just one step in the changes to legal aid that we have seen over the years. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) referred to the famous quote by Mr Justice Mathew, later Lord Justice Mathew. At the turn of the 20th century, he said that the courts of England are open to all like the Ritz hotel. I am sure the hon. Gentleman was not actually there at the time—I was not either—but it has become a stock phrase. The point, however, is that Mr Justice Mathew was being ironic; for those who did not have means, there was precious little access to the courts of England at that time.

After that period, we developed a system of legal aid over a number of years. I accept that I was to some degree a beneficiary of that system, but the system was necessary to ensure that justice was done. Thereafter, it may be argued—I think it was part of the rationale behind LASPO—that in some areas, the system did not work as efficiently as it might. I can think of rolled-up conspiracy trials that went on for about six months, where two barristers for each defendant would ask about one question a week. Frankly, that was not an expenditure that could be justified, and it was not targeting things in the right way.

The problem is that successive Governments seeking to reform—it is worth remembering that changes to legal aid did not begin with LASPO or the coalition Government; they were set in train initially, in some measure, during the Blair and Brown Governments—have run the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In cutting down on some instances of needless expenditure that went beyond what was necessary to ensure justice, there is always a risk that the pendulum will go too far the other way. Having looked at the matter and tried as a lawyer to look at the evidence, I am sorry to say that I am driven to the conclusion that that is what has happened here.

The good news is that there is an opportunity to review things. It is a shame that it has taken so long, but we would all say, “Better late than never.” I know that the Minister is absolutely committed to ensuring proper, good-quality access for all who genuinely need it. I know her personal commitment to the Bar, the rule of law and our legal system and her personal experience of it, so I know she will approach this matter in the open-minded way she did when she was in practice herself. I urge her to look at the evidence. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith said, the evidence is pretty compelling that changes are needed. I do not expect her to say what those changes are going to be today, but I hope she will take away the message that the evidence does not purely come from pressure groups of self-interested lawyers. Nothing could be further from the case.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that our international reputation is at stake? The legal sector is one of the most important in our economy. If we want to continue to be a country that has a global reputation, generating revenues for our economy in respect of international law, we need to ensure that we hold up equality of access to justice for all as a touchstone of our liberty.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He speaks with great experience from his time in practice in serious criminal matters and from his work on the Justice Committee, to which I pay warm tribute. We cannot disaggregate the justice system. As part of our post-Brexit strategy and our “Britain is GREAT” campaign, the Minister’s Department is rightly proclaiming the value of our legal system and legal services, which is real and profound. Their integrity depends on the whole system being properly resourced and funded. It is no good simply to say that we have the best means of commercial dispute resolution and arbitration in the world. It is not enough to say we have probably the best system of civil justice across the piece in the world. It is
equally important that we can say the same about our
criminal justice system, our family law system and our
tribunals system. They are increasingly relevant and
important to the whole system.

Ian C. Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent
speech and an excellent point. May I add that we need to
have a local justice system that works right across the
country? Towns and rural areas also need access to
justice for people in those areas. One of the real problems
with the Government’s running of the justice system
more broadly is that local justice has been profoundly
undermined by lack of provision and court closures.

Robert Neill: With his experience, the hon. Gentleman
makes an entirely valid point. The Justice Committee has
looked at a number of those areas over the past two or
three years or so, and we have looked at aspects of access
to justice in all its forms. It is partly about legal aid, but
there are other matters, too. I will concentrate on legal
aid because that is the subject of the debate, but his
point about other matters is entirely fair and well made.

There is a clear case that in attempting to right what
was perhaps extravagance in some limited areas, we may
have inadvertently done injustice to potential claimants.
We need to put that right. The first area that I would
suggest to the Minister is important is funding advice,
as has already been observed. The legal aid change was
predicated—I was there at the time, as was the hon.
Member for Hammersmith, and I was prepared to take
this on face value—on the idea that it would be a good
ingoing to move away from the comparatively adversarial
approach to family cases to mediation and something
much more collaborative. That has to be the right thing.
The Minister’s Department is recognising that in another
sense with the sensible proposals to reform the divorce
laws to move away from a confrontational approach.
The irony is that so far as legal advice and representation
are concerned, those good intentions have not been
followed through.

As has rightly been observed, early access to legal
advice and a solicitor would put people in the direction
of mediation. We can invest significant money in having
much more public education so that people can assist
themselves, but it may be just as cost-effective—I suspect
it would be more cost-effective—to restore some measure
of early advice in those family cases. Any good solicitor
worth their salt will rightly advise their clients to adopt
that course of mediation if it fits the circumstances of
the case. Restoring the position there would be a sensible
investment to save.

Alex Chalk: Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes
the best advice that a lawyer can give at an early stage is,
“For goodness’ sake, don’t litigate”? If that good advice
is given at an early stage, we can have a reasonable expectation
that the courts will be properly allocated to deal with
those disputes that they should be dealing with.

Robert Neill: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely
right. What he says applies not only to family work, but
to every form of civil litigation and, in truth, to criminal
work, too. When I defended people, I regarded it as my
first and principal duty to give them an honest assessment
of their prospects of successfully defending a charge.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman and I both serve
on the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of
justice. I do not think that people are saying that the
situation is due to malign intent. Many of the things
that we are talking about today are unintended
consequences. Certainly, it was not intended that there
should be miscarriages of justice, or that people should
be unable to get any professional help at all. The Ministry
of Justice is tiny in the scheme of things, but its resources
have been savagely cut.

Robert Neill: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I
agree that there was nothing malign in the intent. The
changes were made at a time when the coalition
Government were under considerable financial pressure
because of the situation that we inherited. I have much
sympathy with that, but to adopt the phrase of John
Maynard Keynes, “When the facts change I change my
opinion—what do you do, sir?” The Government need
do that too, because the evidence has been built up,
and it is powerful.

For a number of reasons, it was thought necessary to
introduce the LASPO reforms at some speed. They
were probably not fully worked through, there was no
chance to do sufficient impact assessments, and they
were not tested. Again, it was not for a malign reason.
At the time, there was a compelling budget imperative
to get on with it, but it created unintended consequences.
As the Prime Minister has observed, we are getting to a
stage where, thanks to the Government’s good economic
stewardship, we might be able to loosen the purse
strings a little in some areas. That gives us the chance
to adopt that Keynesian approach and adjust our conclusions
to the fresh evidence that has come before us.

Early advice is essential. We have talked about family
work and its importance in the criminal system. Any
lawyer will advise his client, if the evidence against him
or her is overwhelming, of the advantageous discount
in sentence for an early plea. Proper advice by specialist
lawyers saves time and money, and saves witnesses in
criminal cases from the trauma of having to go to court.
We should not forget that either, as it is an important
part of the system.

Early advice is also important in cases of housing
and debt, and related matters. People have come to my
surgery, in a comparatively prosperous part of suburban
London, having been in effect served with an eviction
notice because they did not understand the court papers.
Bailiffs were literally coming to the door. We cannot
expect people who often have multiple problems in their
lives necessarily to be able to resolve such things on
their own.

We can certainly make the civil justice system easier
to navigate. The reforms to an online court, for example,
and better means of entering pleadings and dealing
with smaller-sized claims are all perfectly worthy and
worth while. However, ultimately, even if a computer
can process the pleadings efficiently and effectively, it
cannot advise someone on whether there is merit in
their claim, whether they have a defence to an action
brought against them or how they might best compromise
the matter so that they do not, for example, end up on
the street or saddled with significant debt. All those
things require the legal element, and I suggest that there
would be a saving in reinstating some funding there.
I keep in touch with many friends and colleagues at the Bar who now sit on the bench. I sometimes reflect that my career took a wrong turn somewhere along the line. The truth is that anyone in the judiciary—whether from the High Court or, perhaps even more significantly, down to circuit judges and district judges, who shoulder the vast volume of the work, as well as magistrates—will say that the amount of time that is now taken up by litigants in person is placing a serious burden on the system. I go to my local county court and talk to the district judges and the county court judge. Exactly the same thing can be seen at the magistrates court, and I have no doubt that it is replicated across the country.

It is generally thought that a litigant in person will take about three times as long to deal with a case than lawyers would, if they were involved. The upshot is that we are saving cost at one end of the system but piling it on in another part. The net benefit to the public purse is nil—perhaps even negative.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has been so generous. Does he agree that one of the pillars of our world-renowned legal system is the integrity, skill and impartiality of our judges? It is no secret that they feel quite put upon at the moment, not least on pensions and other matters. Their time is being taken up with extremely complex issues where it is harder for them to achieve justice. Does he not agree that we should take that extremely seriously, so that we continue to have a pipeline of the brightest and the best?

Robert Neill: That is right. We could probably have a debate on judicial recruitment and retention.

Alex Chalk: Put in for it.

Robert Neill: Perhaps we should, and perhaps I will encourage my hon. Friend to join me in doing so.

Litigants in person are a real pressure on the totality of the court system, because if courts are being clogged up by cases that are being slowly presented—where the judge has to hold the litigant by the hand to take them through steadily and ensure that there is no miscarriage of justice—that uses up the time of the court building and the court ushers. It puts pressure upon listing, and means delays in other cases coming on. There are more likely to be adjournments because people will not have prepared the bundles properly or got their evidence together. That is all wasted cost in the system, which some early investment would save.

Those are key areas where more could be done. We perhaps need to look, too, at some areas in relation to tribunals—an increasingly important area of jurisdiction. Not all tribunal cases, of course, need legal representation, but they increasingly deal with more complex matters and more complex areas of law and of fact where it makes sense, for exactly the same reasons, to have proper legal advice.

Joining those thoughts together, I commend to the House the Justice Committee’s reports on access to justice, and on courts and tribunal fees. Although fees are separate from the legal aid regime, the unintended consequence of some of those changes was remarkably similar in making access to justice for deserving—that is the key bit—claimants more difficult. Finally, we recently wrote a report on criminal legal aid. I will end on that—it may be the subject on which I have spent most of my life.

We cannot have a situation where it is extremely difficult to get high-quality young lawyers to go into criminal work. The integrity of our system, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) referred, is seen most visibly in the way in which we deal with criminal cases. If the state, no doubt for good reasons, thinks it necessary to bring charges against an individual to be tested in our courts, it is only right and proper that that individual, having had the resource and power of the state brought against them, has as a matter of equality of arms and basic fairness the ability to defend themselves. To do that properly, they must be able to access lawyers who are as good, as well trained, and as competent as those who prosecute.

To do that, we have to be prepared to remunerate people. We cannot have a situation where criminal barristers are worse off, as they are under some aspects of the advocates’ graduated fee scheme at the moment, if they take on a complex and demanding case—for example, a multi-handed rape—as opposed to a single-handed offence of the same kind, because the extra work is simply not reflected in the fee. Those are precisely the cases—I did many of them myself—where experienced and sensitive advocates on both sides are critical. We are in danger of damaging the supply chain, as far as that is concerned.

It also cannot be right that the system does not remunerate defence lawyers for looking at the unused material in cases. Some of the main cases where miscarriages of justice have occurred, as you will know, Sir Henry, from your experience in these matters, are where there has been a failure in disclosure. Usually it is, as is often the case here, a result of unintended error. Although I have come across one or two cases where I could not say that that was the case, things genuinely go wrong, and it must be possible, in terms of the fairness of a trial, for the defence lawyers to be able to look through the unused material and highlight matters that meant that the prosecution could not safely proceed. It seems only right and just that the solicitors and barristers who were on legal aid on those matters should be paid for doing that, because we want to ensure that it is done properly. People have been saved by the integrity of members of the independent Bar, on both sides, who took the opportunity, even though they were not going to be paid for the hours, to go through the unused material and highlight matters that meant that the prosecution could not safely proceed. It seems only right and just that the solicitors and barristers who were on legal aid on those matters should be paid for doing that, because we want to ensure that it is done properly. Let us face it: as those cases highlighted, the sooner it is done the fewer wasted hearings and adjournments, which have bedevilled some of those high-profile cases, there will be. It is not only the right thing but the common-sense thing to do.

We also need to recognise that early advice from solicitors at the police station is critical in criminal cases. Striking evidence was given to the Justice Committee inquiry that the average age of a police station duty solicitor is 47. Young people are not coming into the role because it is simply not remunerated well enough.

That all leads me to the conclusion that Lord Kerr got it right in his Supreme Court judgment on the Unison case. His view, to which I am driven by the evidence, was that regrettably, however good the intentions, the current arrangements under LASPO have adopted
too transactional an approach to justice. He said that litigation is not merely a private transaction between parties; it also involves a greater public good. In that case, which was about employment tribunals, it involved the exposure of bad working practices and improvements that might stem from it, but the principle applies to any type of litigation. There is a public good in access to the courts that goes beyond the right—itself important—of the parties themselves to have access to justice. It is a bigger thing—a point that takes us back to our commitment to the rule of law, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham referred to.

I therefore urge a Keynesian approach on the Minister. Keynes was not always wrong, and he was certainly right about this. If we believe in following the evidence, as we all do in any legal process, and if the evidence indicates that things have gone too far the other way and we have the chance to change them, there is no shame in admitting that. It would be honest politics, good government and entirely consistent with the spirit that the Minister and her ministerial colleagues seek to bring to our approach. Where we can put things right, it is better to accept the position, act on the evidence and ensure that we have a better basis for legal funding and access to justice.

2.41 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, particularly given your personal interest in and commitment to this field of policy. It is also a great pleasure to follow two superb speeches that set out the broad range of topics that we need to cover. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing the debate and on his opening speech. I strongly commend the speech of the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill); I do not think I disagreed with a word of it.

The excellent briefings that we received in advance of the debate from a wide range of organisations come on top of a wealth of analysis that has already contributed to the debate, not only from the Justice Committee but from my own Committee, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which produced a report including an analysis of many of the post-LASPO failings. The case has already been made, as we have heard today, but I wish to make a few marks to convey not just an analytical concern for the post-LASPO world, but the real anxiety, passion and anger that so many people feel about the environment in which we find ourselves.

Yesterday morning, we marked Justice Week with a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid. We were very pleased that the Minister came to speak to us and that the meeting was very well attended, including by the Bar Council, the Law Society, parliamentarians, a great many people from the not-for-profit sector, and solicitors. We heard a compelling case for the central role of legal aid and for ensuring access to justice. We heard the message that the Government need to hear thunder reverberating, because every single prediction made before the passage of LASPO has come to pass. We heard that the situation has declined to the point that the criminal Bar has thought it necessary to take strike action and the Law Society is taking legal action against the Government. It is unprecedented in modern times for those organisations to feel compelled to take such strong action, but they want the Government to hear exactly what is going on.

Sadly, in Justice Week, we also learned in the Budget that the Ministry of Justice, which with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has already taken the largest cuts of any Department, is to be subject to yet another cut. It is an unprotected Department, and we now know that its budget will be cut from £6.3 billion to £6 billion. We are making the case for legal aid in a context in which justice funding is falling still further.

As we have heard, legal aid is in competition with many other areas of justice that are also under intolerable pressure. Almost every hon. Member in this Chamber has been present at debates that conveyed our anxiety about other creaking, breaking parts of the criminal justice system, so it is understandable that we are extremely concerned to ensure that the case for legal aid is not made at the expense of the prison service or the other parts of the justice system that are also under absolutely intolerable strain. In truth, the thunder is reverberating; it is just that the Government have not been listening.

I will not repeat in great detail the case that has been made so widely in this House and through the many forms of evidence submitted to the LASPO review about the consequences of areas of service falling out of scope and of the tightening of eligibility. The impact on providers has in turn had an impact on people—often the most vulnerable people—who need to be effectively represented.

Robert Neill: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady’s argument, and I am glad that she referred to Justice Week. Does she agree that it might be worth while for every Member of this House to watch the Bar Council’s video about justice cuts, in which several providers, as well as hon. Members, talk about the impact on the individual cases they deal with?

Ms Buck: Absolutely. I would love every Member of this House to watch that video and to be made aware of the case being made.

We know what is happening to legal aid providers. Law centres lost 60% of their income from legal aid post LASPO, and in the immediate aftermath we lost eleven law centres. I pay tribute to my own centre, Paddington law centre, which provides such an essential service. I also commend North Kensington law centre—this country’s first law centre, which I used to represent but is now just outside my constituency—for doing such extraordinary work in the aftermath of Grenfell.

Law centres are indispensable; they are an integral part of effective community life. The Chair of the Justice Committee was absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that justice is not a private transaction. These services—particularly law centres, but not only them—are part of a healthy community and a strong civic life. The consequences of undermining them go far beyond the individuals concerned.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a lesson for us in this place, too? There is no point in our standing up, making speeches, passing legislation and pontificating grandly if the laws that we give effect to are ultimately not capable of being enforced. Is that not a crucial point?
Ms Buck: That is absolutely right. I will come on to a variant of that theme—the extent to which the law is having to bear the burden of bad laws and bad implementation of policy. We are seeing even more of that now than we were before.

In addition to the impact on law centres, we have also seen a fall in the number of providers across the piece, including a 60% fall in not-for-profit providers. I am sure that the Government did not want not-for-profits, with all their ability to lever in additional support from outside legal aid, to be a form of service that was reduced, yet absolutely inevitably and as was predicted, the not-for-profit sector has seen some of the deepest cuts.

As we heard, there has been a calamitous fall across the piece in new acts of assistance, with legal help matter starts down from 573,000 in 2012 to 140,000 in 2017, so we know that people who would previously have got legal assistance and representation are now not doing so. We have heard also about the kinds of areas of service where that has had an impact. What we have not heard yet is that this is happening in a context in which the demand and need for that kind of representation and advocacy is growing.

In terms of welfare, that is an absolute explicit consequence of the welfare reform legislation, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the changes to disability benefits, which have seen so many people losing their benefits. They have been making appeals against that, and winning those appeals in unprecedented numbers—at a level that clearly demonstrates the total inadequacy of the way in which disability policy has been drawn up—but those appeals are only being won where people have representation and advocacy. There is a difference in the success rate for people who are appealing against loss of benefits where they are represented and where they are not. It is deeply worrying that people with identical conditions and identical sets of circumstances may or may not be successful in maintaining or restoring their disability benefits depending on whether they live in an area where they are able to access advice and representation.

As people will not be surprised to know, another issue that is close to my heart, homelessness, is another factor. After many years in which homelessness fell, there has been a doubling of rough sleeping and a 50% increase in the number of families going into the homelessness system. Although that remains within scope, with the loss of providers and the pressure on the system, the demand for assistance is rising but the ability to provide is not.

Speakers this afternoon have talked about different groups of people who have fed evidence in to the debate. I am particularly grateful to Youth Access for its briefing. It wanted to draw attention to the predicament of young people, who experience many of the difficulties with the welfare system and housing on the same level as others, but who are particularly unlikely to be able to access help. Youth Access states that 84% of young people are left unaided in their search for legal representation. That too will have worsened post-LASPO.

It is unfashionable in this House to champion the cause of the lawyers who provide these services. We often hear about fat cat lawyers, or see the media representation of the tiny number of lawyers who have made a considerable amount of money through the legal aid system. The truth is that legal aid lawyers are in very challenging financial circumstances. They have not had a pay rise for a very long time. Unless we are able to retain them and attract a new generation of lawyers into legal aid, the service available in some parts of the country will decline further.

In the debate in my name on the LASPO review a few weeks ago, I set out a more detailed critique of what has gone wrong since 2012, so I will not cover any more of those points now. The Minister was very courteous in her response and subsequently replied to some of the questions; she also attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group. I understand that she is not able to pre-empt the conclusions of the LASPO review today, but in that debate at the beginning of September I listened in vain for a sense of a real commitment to understanding the scale of the challenge that we face. I hope that today she will be able not just to tell us what money is going into the legal aid system—I think we already know that—but to convey a sense of her passion for wanting to address and redress the problems that so many people across the board are now telling her about.

What we are looking for, and what we hope we hear a commitment to today with the detail spelled out when we get the LASPO review, is a restoration of money for early help. Everybody understands the importance of early intervention and preventive services, so we want to get a commitment to putting money back into early help. We have specific and detailed proposals for improving eligibility, for simplifying and clarifying the rules on eligibility, for bringing certain areas back into scope.

Family law is a particular area that we want to see restored, as well as criminal legal aid, which should include a proper recognition of the need to tackle the under-remuneration of criminal legal aid lawyers.

Access to justice is as fundamental to the functioning of a good society as services such as health and education, which we more often invoke when we talk about public services. Access to justice is now being deeply and dangerously undermined. We need not just warm words, but urgent and immediate action from the Minister.

2.56 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing what has been an excellent debate.

I start by picking up on a couple of comments from the contributions so far, not least on the matter of self-representation and the fact that it leads to an increased potential for miscarriages of justice. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who has just left his place, mentioned the importance of the rule of law. Over the last couple of years, there has been an increasing reference to the rule of law in this country, as part of the debate on restoring our sovereignty; it is becoming much more important to people and is much higher up the agenda. It must be reflected in a strong and impactful justice system. Without it, we cannot continue to consider ourselves a bastion of extraordinary strength in our legal framework.

More and more in my constituency surgeries, I receive queries on matters such as immigration, although housing, welfare and family matters are also prevalent. I echo the
comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) about the advice that is being given to people in quite complex circumstances. Very often, people arrive at my door having been given advice on Home Office procedure or relevant sections of Home Office codes and regulations by paralegals or so-called legal advisers, who are not solicitors. They have paid thousands for this erroneous advice. Those in my office, who are also not legally qualified, have to untangle the mess. Thanks to the expertise of our own Library and the resources that we have access to, we are able to point them in the right direction and give the right kind of support that they need.

There is much in this debate that I am sure the Minister is listening to very carefully. As has been mentioned, a number of advice briefings have been circulated ahead of this debate. I read the Mencap briefing, which really resonated, especially in terms of the reference that it made to low levels of legal literacy among the general population, and to the fact that there is very limited access even to basic advice, with people increasingly becoming more reliant on organisations that are unable to take on legal cases. They might be able to advise up to a certain point, but they are unable to take the matter forward and provide representation, with the result that people, without that background of knowledge and perhaps without the skills to take their case forward fully are left without a full level of support in their case.

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

The Mencap briefing refers to the suggestion that the Government should address the problems with the supply of specialist solicitors. That is the reason why I wanted to participate in this debate and the reason for my concerns about the lack of availability of solicitors, particularly in areas like Grimsby, and around responsive criminal matters. The Library debate pack reminds us that, as we have heard already, there have been “significant changes to criminal legal aid, particularly in relation to means testing of applicants and to rates of pay for solicitors and barristers undertaking criminal work.”

It notes that most of that has come through secondary legislation. That has made it even harder for solicitors to continue to run their practices.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) highlighted the issue of access to justice in towns, but in towns such as Grimsby, lots of solicitors have closed down their practices and moved to nearby cities, where they are more assured of getting additional work, or they have completely changed their area of speciality. The awful thing is that that fact, which I believe has come about because of the limitations around legal aid, is now being used as part of the evidential base in consultations on future local court viability.

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady makes a very good point about the impact on firms of solicitors. I wonder whether she might be interested to know that evidence given to the Justice Committee suggested that when the Solicitors Regulation Authority took data from some 2,000 firms, 5% were at high risk of financial difficulty and 45% were at medium risk—so half were running some risk of financial difficulty. The prime mover in that was exposure to having more than half their fee income from criminal or family legal aid. It is forcing firms out of business.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful point, which surely must go towards the consideration of what kind of legal advice will be available around the country in the future if firms are at risk of closure because they cannot secure their anticipated income. It certainly cannot be much of a draw for those who are thinking about entering the legal profession and perhaps joining a local firm.

On Monday, a consultation was launched on listing arrangements in magistrates courts across the Humber and South Yorkshire. One issue that is highlighted in the consultation document is the changes that are coming about due to the low number of legal advisers available to cover the courts at the Grimsby site. I cannot help but think that the reason why so few legal advisers are available to cover that site is that we have seen so much closure as a result of limitations to legal aid. It almost feels like a self-fulfilling prophecy—that a decision has been made that impacts this, and is now driving yet another consultation on justice. It will have yet another impact on people’s overall access to justice, albeit in a slightly different area from the main subject of this debate.

To support that line of argument, the consultation includes a number of annexes and has various statistics to prove the necessity of the structural reform. The dates provided for these statistics run from 2017 to 2018 or from the beginning of January until the end of August 2018, none of which takes into account the number of cases and the support that was available before legal aid cuts had such an impact, reducing the number of solicitors available locally. I cannot help but think that there is an in-built bias in the consultation document, which already leads us down the route to saying that there is no requirement for the court system as it exists in that area.

The consultation document lists eight benefits while providing just two identifiable drawbacks:

“Defendants in custody who would otherwise have appeared at Burnley, Doncaster, Beverley and Grimsby, may now need to be transported a greater distance to appear in court. This may also apply to their representatives, and others wishing to support those defendants. Producing defendants in custody at fewer sites will increase the pressure on custody facilities at those sites.”

The document fails to recognise the issue of Grimsby’s local geography—of where we are in the country. It talks about our being 33 miles from Hull, but that must be as the crow flies because it is certainly not that distance on any form of public transport. In reality, it is at least an hour’s drive for people to access those custody suites, bearing in mind the traffic in Hull and Sheffield, which are the two nearest courts that it is being suggested we will be directed to. Two hours on a bus or train to access those provisions really is not accessibility at all for people. Even if people are to drive and there are to be police officers escorting people under arrest to those sites, that will take away significant resources from police, who we would otherwise expect to be on our streets.

I have been contacted to say that exactly the same process happened in Scunthorpe, which is a 40-minute drive from Grimsby. Twelve months ago, Scunthorpe had a fully operational magistrates court with custody facilities. Just 12 months after those custody facilities were lost, the magistrates court was entirely closed. Such a process is not something that people in my area would be best served by. There does not seem to be any
consideration of the additional pressures of such closures on other areas and the custody facilities at nearby suites. I think that there will be a significant limitation, in terms of cost and ability, of people's attendance at those sites. It is likely that we will see a greater level of non-attendance. If we think about justice in its fullest meaning, and about access and support around the whole justice system, I cannot see how those two fit together in any way.

The frequently asked questions in the consultation document talk about queries on subsequent trials and mention that trials will be held at whichever sites are “most convenient for defendants, victims and witnesses.”

I know the shadow Minister has visited my constituency, so she will be aware how precarious the public transport system is; it is incredibly difficult to get to. The FAQs conclude that the difficulties are “likely to be few within the overall circumstances.”

I find it surprising that that kind of expediency can be given, and that it can be considered acceptable for even one person not to receive the same kind of access to justice facilities.

I want to finish with an email that a local defence solicitor sent me to make me aware of these issues. He wrote:

“A local matter has arisen which may be of interest to you which will affect the whole community. A consultation (8 weeks) has been issued by HM Courts Service proposing that from April next year all Grimsby prisoners/people from Grimsby in custody go to Hull Magistrates Court to be dealt with and not Grimsby. Grimsby will no longer deal with custody cases. Local people from Grimsby will have their cases dealt with by Magistrates in Hull who have no connection to our area. This is exactly what happened in Scunthorpe a short time ago, their custody work was moved here to Grimsby and within 12 months the Court was closed altogether. All agencies in the local Criminal Justice believe the move is the first step to close Grimsby Magistrates Court and are opposed to the proposals. We are to fight against this but as with the fate of many Courts we fear we may be fighting a losing battle...Any support from you would be greatly appreciated...This”—

will destroy local justice for local people.”

I hope the Minister will bear that in mind in her closing comments.

3.11 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for applying for this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

Every single one of us here has similar concerns about the severity of the cuts. Today we have been highlighting the impact that the LASPO Act has had on our constituents and our communities over the past five years. I will speak specifically about Wales because of the particular issues there. They will of course be common to much that has already been raised, but it is important that particular needs are considered. Wales has experienced the largest decline in legal aid providers over the past five years—a decrease of 29%—and today I will talk about the impact on housing, criminal legal aid, and the experience of victims of crime, particularly in the family court.

Legal aid in the housing sector has been particularly hard hit owing to the rates set by the Government, which have left Wales with only one housing legal aid provider in half of the procurement areas and a host of problems. First, families on low incomes might not be able to travel to see the only provider in their area, which might be located many miles away from where they live, because of travel costs and the availability of public transport. That is particularly true in rural areas. The inability to seek essential legal advice can, in the most extreme cases, result in homelessness. Secondly, one firm in a large area might not have capacity to provide advice to those who need it. People requiring legal aid advice on housing issues often need advice urgently and cannot afford to go on a waiting list. Thirdly, conflicts of interest can arise because one law firm cannot represent both tenant and landlord, or represent a tenant if the landlord is engaged with the firm on another matter. We have a real concern about conflicts of interest.

I welcome the recent High Court ruling in favour of the Law Society, confirming that the UK Government’s latest cuts to the pay of criminal lawyers are unlawful. Criminal law duty solicitors, as we have heard, are already in high demand, and we have good grounds to believe that the situation will worsen if present trends continue. In Wales, where we have a specific need for people who can operate professionally through the medium of Welsh—a very real need in the county of Gwynedd and other communities in rural Wales—the shortage is even more exaggerated. In future, who will be able to provide that which we have a right to—justice in English and Welsh—if we do not have those people coming through?

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady might like to know that the figures provided to the Justice Committee in relation to mid and west Wales suggest that 60% of criminal law duty solicitors were over the age of 50. That situation clearly is not sustainable.

Liz Saville Roberts: The hon. Gentleman has just anticipated one of my next sentences. We have an ageing specialist profession, many of whom are able to operate through the medium of Welsh, and we are not seeing those skilled and important individuals coming through. Unless the Government reverse the cuts and provide an incentive for more people to train in criminal law, they will seriously threaten the right of individuals to access independent expert legal advice in either Welsh or English free of charge when detained by the police.

Finally, I want to explain how the cuts to legal aid are putting victims of domestic abuse, stalking and harassment in further danger and forcing them to come face to face with their abusers. Even if that was never the intention, that is the result. A survey of 122 victims of stalking and domestic abuse conducted by Plaid Cymru found that 55% of victims had court proceedings taken out against them by their abusers, despite restraining orders being in place, and two thirds of the victims then had to appear in court. Although it might be unintended, that snapshot is extremely revealing. Due to the cuts in legal aid, many abusers were not given free legal representation,
so they represented themselves. It is distressing enough for a victim of abuse to have vexatious proceedings—they are too often vexatious—taken out against them and to have to appear in court, but a third of the victims had to go through the trauma of being personally cross-examined by the person who had been stalking and relentlessly harassing them, who had made their lives such a misery that they had had to take out a restraining order against them. Again, that might not have been the intention of the legislation, but that is the result. It is in no circumstances safe; nor is it a responsible or just way to treat victims.

The situation is the result of unyielding cuts to legal aid. I do not think that the UK Government anticipated that victims of abuse would bear the brunt of the cuts in such a way, but unfortunately that is the case. Many people predicted such results, and the evidence that has come to pass proves them correct. Again, I echo fellow Members here when such evidence is presented to us. I sincerely hope and believe that the Minister feels strongly on this matter, too. We need to resolve this. We have the evidence and time has passed. We are seeing the evidence in our constituency meetings and hearing it from legal experts, of whom I am not one, but this issue cries out to be addressed.

The principle of equality before the law should be upheld. A valid justice system must enable everyone to access legal advice. It must not remain a privilege afforded only to the wealthy.

3.17 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Bailey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this important debate today, particularly during Justice Week.

A recent survey commissioned by the Law Society, Bar Council and Chartered Institute of Legal Executives showed that 78% of people agree that justice is as important as health or education, yet only 20% of the 2,000 respondents thought there was sufficient funding for those who need legal advice. Since the implementation of LASPO under the coalition Government, the reduction in legal aid has caused a crisis of access to justice. Our justice system is fast becoming a two-tier system where the dividing line is determined by who can, and more often cannot, afford legal advice. Access to justice and the rule of law, which underpin so many things within society, are slowly ebbing away for many across the country.

LASPO removed many areas of law from the remit of civil legal aid, including in the sphere of housing, welfare, debt, employment, immigration, family law and clinical negligence. The Bar Council was absolutely damning in its recent assessment of LASPO: in a survey of members, 91% of respondents reported that the number of individuals struggling to get access to legal advice and representation had increased or risen significantly; the same number of respondents also reported a significant increase in the number of litigants in person in family cases. Most worryingly, however, 25% of respondents had stopped doing civil legal aid work, and 48% of barristers surveyed did less legal aid work than before. We know about legal aid deserts popping up across the country. Almost one third of the legal aid areas in England and Wales have one local legal aid housing advice provider, or none. LASPO has shunned those who most need help.

The ideologically driven cuts to budgets have had a profound impact on legal aid, but analysis has shown that the cuts to early advice in particular, as well as being a sign of poor decision making, cost the state more. When there is early advice, problems are resolved much more quickly, with 25% of cases resolved within three to four months, compared with nine months when there is no early advice.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): One area in which LASPO has perversely driven up costs is immigration. LASPO exempted certain immigration cases. Home Office error affects about 50,000 British-born children of parents who are legally in the UK and who have no recourse to public funds. A third are likely to have their decisions overturned. They are wholly reliant on council funding and children’s services. The cost vastly exceeds the cost of providing housing benefit or child benefit. It can take years to overturn decisions, as I have seen in my casework and surgeries.

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend’s constituency is not a million miles from mine and I completely relate to the points he raised about the cases people bring to surgery. I have lost count of the number of food vouchers that I have given to families in exactly the situation he describes—trapped in the immigration system without being able to get access to any kind of legal aid to resolve their problems.

For many years before entering this place I was an employment rights lawyer representing trade union members, and I regularly had to advise clients on their prospects of success in employment tribunal cases. In my experience, if I advised someone at the outset that their case had very little merit, they would rarely pursue it further; as a result, the tribunal did not get clogged up with unmeritorious claims, and judges did not need to spend time dealing with litigants in person. Conversely, if a claim did have prospects, often the early involvement of a lawyer providing objective advice meant that the claim would be resolved far earlier in the process, and often there was no need to resort to costly litigation. That brings home the fact that cutting early legal advice costs the justice system more, because of the number of cases that go forward and the time taken to deal with litigants in person in court.

By restoring early legal advice in the spheres of housing, immigration and welfare, not only would expensive legal proceedings often be avoided, but there would be less strain elsewhere in the system, on such things as housing and welfare costs. For example, it falls to the local authority to house someone who was evicted because of welfare benefit issues, and that often costs a great deal more than legal advice would have. The cost to the NHS when someone lives in a house in total disrepair is likely to be far greater than the cost of early legal advice to resolve the housing issue. As others have said, the extent to which the legal aid budget was cut is a false economy.

It is not only civil law that has suffered under this Government. The criminal justice system has been hit by cuts too, as others have mentioned. Earlier this year, barristers across the country went on strike. They are not a group known for taking industrial action, but they did so following the introduction of a new fees system, which meant that many barristers had to work unpaid while analysing evidence and preparing for trial.
As I said, 78% of people agree that justice is as important as health. In the recent book “The Secret Barrister”—I recommend it to anyone who has not already read it—the author sums up the current state of the system:

“In every crumbling, decaying magistrates’ Court and leaking Crown Court, we see every day the law’s equivalent of untreated, neglected patients on hospital trolleys. And every day it is met with a wall of silence.”

The issues affecting the criminal justice system are not down to legal aid alone, but properly financing legal aid would be a good place to start to resolve them. If people are to come into direct contact with the justice system, both they and the public must have confidence that it will deliver justice. Access to justice and the rule of law underpin our society. Yet successive Tory Governments have cut the Ministry of Justice budget by 40%. The idea of access to justice for the many has been eroded in just eight years. The Tories have positioned themselves as the party of law, order and justice, but the millions-worth of cuts forced on the Ministry of Justice since 2010 underline how out of touch the Government have become on justice matters.

Legal aid should provide the public with a means to pursue justice regardless of their wealth, yet many are now left to fend for themselves, often facing huge inequality of arms and feeling deep mistrust as to whether the system will be able to deliver for them. Contrary to what the Prime Minister continues to tell us, austerity is by no means over for those seeking justice.

3.26 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on obtaining this important and timely debate.

I will begin my assessment of the future of legal aid by outlining its origins. The first legislation to provide for legal help paid for by the state—there had been ad hoc funding for legal representation since Tudor times—was the Poor Prisoners Defence Act 1903. Payment was made only once a prisoner could establish a defence to a criminal charge. At about the same time, there was a “poor man’s lawyer” movement in east London, providing free legal advice up to but not including court. Pro bono representation was also available for divorce, but, again, that was patchy and ad hoc.

In 1944 the wartime coalition Government set up a committee, chaired by the Conservative peer Lord Rushcliffe, to assess the need for legal advice provided by the state. Lord Rushcliffe’s committee’s recommendations were accepted by the Labour Government, which stated in a White Paper that legislation would be introduced “to provide legal advice for those of slender means and resources, so that no one would be financially unable to prosecute a just and reasonable claim or defend a legal right; and to allow counsel and solicitors to be remunerated for their services”.

Those are the principles that underpin our legal aid system.

The Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949 provided legal representation for those of small or moderate means in all courts and tribunals where lawyers normally appeared for private clients. Since then, legal aid has been chipped away by successive Governments. Since the passage of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, the legal aid budget has been slashed by £950 million, and many people have been taken out of scope, so that they do not get funding for cases involving matters such as housing disrepair, immigration, welfare benefits and family law.

On 11 July, the Joint Committee on Human Rights produced its report “Enforcing Human Rights”. The Committee said in the report that access to justice was an essential component of the rule of law, and referred to Lord Bingham’s statement:

“Means must be provided for resolving, without prohibitive cost or inordinate delay, bona fide civil disputes which the parties themselves are unable to resolve”.

The report was critical of the effect of LASPO, saying that it had “deleterious and discriminatory effects on particular groups” and “a disproportionate impact on various groups, including disabled people, women, children and migrants.”

Let me consider each of those in turn.

People with immigration problems are also badly affected by LASPO, which took applications for refugee family reunion out of the scope of legal aid. In the absence of legal aid, people with refugee status in the UK are vulnerable to exploitation, as they have to take out informal, high-interest loans to pay for their family reunion applications, which are often complex and not straightforward. There is exceptional case funding, but it is not feasible for many applicants to access it, due to the large proportion of applications rejected. Many people are left in a very difficult situation.

Young people are also affected. According to Youth Access research, 18 to 24-year-olds are significantly more likely to have problems, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, the vast majority—84%—get no help from a professional adviser or lawyer. Of the 15% of 18 to 24-year-olds who recognise that their problem is legal, only 6% are eligible for legal aid on financial grounds.

The situation is just as bad for women. Rights for Women, in its submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, quoted a woman responding to a survey for legal aid who said:

“I earn a low income, yet I’ve been assessed as having too much disposable income… and when you aren’t eligible, you’re expected to pay full solicitors’ costs—there’s no help anywhere in between. I’ve had to face my violent ex-partner in court twice now, and will have to continue to do so as I simply cannot afford costs.”

Even if people are eligible for legal aid, remuneration for lawyers means that there are advice deserts across the country. Legal aid rates today are the same as in 1994, yet inflation has increased prices by 89.3% since then. I recently had the pleasure of shadowing a junior barrister at Thames magistrates court; she told me that she would get a legal aid rate of only £50 for the hearing that she attended.
The aims of LASPO were to discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at public expense, to target legal aid at those who need it most, to make substantial savings and to deliver better value for money. Having saved £950 million, LASPO certainly has delivered substantial savings, but at what cost? Is it delivering better value for money? Given the closure of many law firms and the spread of advice deserts, people who are eligible are left with little or no choice of solicitors who do legal aid work. Law firms specialising in the relevant area of legal aid are often over-run, and it may be impossible to get an appointment for many weeks, if at all. People may need to travel long distances to get legal advice.

What is to be done? I ask the Minister to do three things. First, restore access to early advice so disputes can be resolved fairly and reasonably, and so people do not embark on ill-advised, costly litigation. Restore access to welfare advice so the people who are most desperate can get the advice and support they need to challenge unfair decisions. Secondly, simplify the criteria for those who need legal aid—at the moment, many people find it hard to access legal aid, and there are conflicting and competing areas of application, which do not make much sense. Finally, justice cannot be done on the cheap. Please find the money to invest in legal aid.

3.35pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Oxstall Smith) on setting the scene and initiating the debate and giving us all an opportunity to participate in it. There are many more experienced, learned minds in the Chamber with a better legal understanding than me. I am simply here on behalf of my constituents who, without legal aid, would never have seen justice. That is where I am coming from, and that is the point I am trying to make. I do so to put forward the legal mind of the right hon. and hon. Members who have shared their experience. I am just putting forward a constituency point of view.

As the Minister knows, Northern Ireland has its own legal aid system. I want to outline what we do with it. It might be the envy of other hon. Members when they hear what we do, but has become financially restricted in the past few years. We are working with a new financial regime, but at the same time we have been able to deliver many things.

I am delighted to be able to speak about legal aid. I fully support a system that, if used correctly, fills a gap, and assists and benefits those who have little or no access to legal representation. Solicitors are turning away people who need legal representation because the funding is no longer available. I am not criticising them for that; that is a reality of life. Those on the lowest incomes are excluded from accessing justice if they have savings or assets—for example, a house. Working people on low incomes who are accused of wrongdoing are systematically denied their right to a fair trial, because they cannot access representation even when it is as clear as day that they cannot afford to pay for it themselves. I will give a couple of examples. The Minister is always very responsive to the points of view that we put forward, so I look forward to her response.

There is often only one firm, and sometimes no firms, able to offer legal aid support on housing law, which is a key issue that comes up in my constituency office all the time. It is one of the bread-and-butter issues that we deal with every day. The background information that we received from the Library outlines that legal aid may not be available even when a person’s liberty is at stake, when a person faces the loss of their house, in domestic violence cases and when children might be taken into care. The exemptions for housing law clearly fall at that hurdle.

We look forward to the Government’s review of legal aid, which the Secretary of State promised as far back as March this year in answer to another Member of Parliament, yet it has not been delivered within the timescale that was set out. I am pleased that the Government have now committed to carry out a review by the end of the year, as other hon. Members said, but I seek an assurance from the Minister that that timescale can be met.

I want to make some comments about what we do with legal aid in Northern Ireland and what the scheme means. Legal aid in Northern Ireland currently costs £63.65 million per annum. At present, it falls under two distinct headings: civil legal aid, which provides help and assistance in civil and family matters, and criminal legal aid, which provides help and assistance to those accused of a criminal offence. In fact, legal aid subject to means and merits tests is available for many aspects of the law that are triable in court in Northern Ireland.

Despite the reductions in the availability of legal aid, we can still do many things. New proposals from UK Government Departments have a direct impact on legal aid expenditure—for example, changing the criminal or civil law, or improving or affecting in any way the rights of individuals—without the impact being immediately apparent. It is therefore essential that an assessment of how policy change might impact on legal aid is made as
early as possible. We look to the Minister for some direction on that. With the assistance of colleagues, we will also assess any possible impacts on the work of the courts.

Civil legal aid costs about £38.25 million a year and provides help across a range of areas, such as adoption and affiliation, bail, bankruptcy, children and family matters, divorce, maintenance and other matrimonial issues, injunctions, judicial reviews on negligence, whether general, medical or tripping, and personal injury cases. Within civil legal aid, there are three main stages: legal advice and assistance by way of representation and legal aid, initial advice on any aspect of Northern Ireland law, and qualification, which is subject to an evaluation of the individual’s financial circumstances—the means test.

Legal aid, including assistance by way of representation, provides for comprehensive help including, where required, representation in court. To qualify, two tests must be met. The first involves financial eligibility, and depending on the applicant’s personal circumstances, they may receive free help or may have to pay a contribution towards the cost of the case. The second test involves the merits of the case; a person shall not, for example, be given legal aid in connection with any proceedings unless they show that they have reasonable grounds for taking, defending or being a party thereto.

The Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland is currently undertaking a substantial reform programme, which will result in the introduction of civil legal services under the Access to Justice Order (Northern Ireland) 2003, so we are considering changes in Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister will be aware of that as she is well on top of her portfolio and understands what we are doing. I appreciate that understanding.

Criminal legal aid costs approximately £25.4 million a year, representing approximately 40% of the total legal aid budget. There are three levels of service: advice and assistance on general criminal matters, under the same provisions for civil cases; free advice and assistance for anyone being interviewed at a police station in connection with a suspected offence, or what they call “PACE advice”; and free legal aid. To qualify, the court must satisfy itself that the means of the accused are insufficient to enable him or her to obtain legal aid and that, in the interests of justice, the accused—or a person brought before the court to be dealt with—has free legal aid.

In satisfying itself, the court may consider, among other matters, whether the offence is serious enough that on conviction a custodial sentence is possible; whether there is a possibility of loss of livelihood or damage to the reputation of a person; whether there is a substantial question of law to be argued; or whether the accused is unable to understand the proceedings, for example if they do not speak English or have mental or emotional issues. Currently there is free legal aid in all criminal proceedings in Northern Ireland. Approximately 35% of the total individuals who appeared in magistrates’ court and 98% of the total individuals who appeared in Crown court were legally aided.

I have given some background, because for the purpose of the debate it is good for everyone to know what we are doing. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members are interested in what we are doing in Northern Ireland, just as I am interested in what happens in other parts of the United Kingdom. I am very aware of the good that legal aid can deliver to those I often refer to as the “wee man” and “wee woman”. I have a clear social conscience, as do other hon. Members present and the Minister. Our desire to help those who cannot always help themselves has been clear in all contributions. I want to ensure that everyone has access to justice and that those with the financial accessibility do not override those without it, and that fair play and the right to a level playing field are fully and totally justified.

The numerous questions raised by the Library’s background information on legal aid illustrate quite clearly that all is not well with the legal aid system in the UK at the moment. It was introduced with admirable duty and conscience, yet now Government oversee a much lessened scheme. The figures from 2017-18 illustrate that very clearly: only 140,000 civil cases started with legal aid, compared with 785,000 cases in 2010-11, a decrease of 82%. Over the last seven years, legal aid has been reduced by four fifths—a drastic reduction. I am not saying that the data is entirely wrong, but those figures illustrate a clear deficit in the possibilities of legal aid. We have to have a legal aid system that works well for those who need it the most.

In her introduction, the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) referred to tribunals and appeals. In the past, many people would have taken someone with a legal mind along to assist them. That has changed greatly. The hon. Lady is probably like me—probably like all of us—in that we represent our constituents on legal tribunals whatever their benefit issue might be: disability living allowance, personal independence payments, employment and support allowance, or community grants.

We do that because it is our duty to, but we also have to learn the rudimentary legal parts of that system so that we can represent the law at the tribunal. In the past, in many cases, that would have been up to solicitors and others of legal mind.

I will always fight for those who need help and will continue to be a voice for them. I conclude as I am conscious that others wish to speak. I say with all sincerity to everyone here and to the Minister in particular that society is measured by its attitude towards and help for those who need it access to legal help. They should have their day in court on an equal basis and never be disadvantaged. Justice demands it, and right must and should always persist.

3.47 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), not only on securing the debate but on his thoroughly comprehensive and powerful introduction to the topic. In fact, I also thank all hon. Members for their incredibly insightful contributions.
Since I was elected, barely more than three years ago, I think this is the fourth, fifth or even sixth time that we have been in Westminster Hall to debate legal aid or wider access-to-justice issues, and yet so little seems to have changed. We are still waiting for the review of LASPO to be completed—never mind implemented—although an end appears to be just about in sight, which would be welcome indeed. Persistence in pushing for reform is therefore essential. As other hon. Members have said, the issues are fundamental ones. Legal aid is crucial to access to justice and the rule of law. As many hon. Members have expressed today, LASPO represents a misguided and dangerous undermining of those fundamental principles, putting access to justice beyond the reach of many through changes to the scope and eligibility criteria for legal aid.

As the Chair of the Justice Committee has said, that is not an academic matter. Numerous hon. Members have provided all sorts of practical examples of the impact of those changes on their constituents, whether those cases concern clinical negligence, miscarriages of justice, family matters, domestic abuse, social security, housing, debt or immigration. Hon. Members have referred repeatedly to the creation of advice deserts. That has all been at a time when, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) rightly pointed out, demand for some of those services could not be higher. Demand is soaring in cases of social security law and immigration law, at a time when the ability to access good legal advice is plummeting.

At the outset, the hon. Member for Hammersmith referred to what seems to have become the Government catchphrase in debates such as this, and it goes to the heart of what LASPO represents. The phrase jars with me, I have to say. Over and over again, the Government say that legal aid is available to “those who need it most”. That jars with me because the goal of any legal aid system should be that legal aid is available to all those who need it most, the Government in essence seem to be saying that LASPO was a legitimate exercise in the rationing of legal aid, accepting that many who need it will nevertheless not get it. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has said, if people do not get legal aid, that means that many of them simply do not get justice.

All Members have highlighted that LASPO’s flaws have been exposed repeatedly, including by the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, the Law Society, the Law Commission and many others. The Justice Committee concluded that the Act had failed to achieve three of its four stated goals. The one successful goal was that of cutting the budget, but that was at the cost of harming access to justice for some litigants.

On that note, it would be interesting to know what LASPO represented for other budgets, including its impact on service provision for homelessness, social work and health. Those services pick up the pieces when people struggle to vindicate their rights under housing law, employment law or social security law. What do we know is the impact that LASPO has had on those courts, as party litigants struggle to make their way through complex litigation. The hon. Members for Hammersmith and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) set that out extremely starkly.

My party supports a comprehensive legal aid system—one that is open-ended, uncapped and demand-led; in other words, one that is much closer to what was in existence in England and Wales before LASPO, and to what still exists in Scotland and, as I understand it, in the Netherlands. The main point that I want to make is that such a system, or a move in the direction of it, as Members have called for today, does not have to be prohibitively expensive. In fact, despite its significantly broader scope and financial eligibility rules—about 70% of people in Scotland would qualify for civil legal aid—the system north of the border still costs slightly less per head of population than that in operation down here, at £25.02, as opposed to £25.54. Why is that?

This week the Library provided me with an interesting set of figures that suggest that although legal aid is provided in many more cases in Scotland, it is done at far less cost. In 2016-17, for example, there were 4,000 grants of assistance per 100,000 inhabitants in Scotland, which is some 75% more than the 2,300 grants per 100,000 inhabitants in England and Wales, but spending in each of those legal aid cases was two thirds higher in England and Wales, at about £1,000, compared with £600 in Scotland.

Those figures seem to be consistent with what far more knowledgeable Members have said today about the value of intervention, even on a small scale at an early stage. One Justice Committee report pointed out: “The Ministry’s efforts to target legal aid at those who most need it have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive.”

The more comprehensive system in Scotland has meant spending small amounts of money at a better time, so the overall spend in each individual case has been kept lower. Several hon. Members made a similar point about early advice.

Those Library figures are also consistent with the argument that there are other ways to keep the legal aid bill under control. Most of our previous debates about legal aid have highlighted the work of Professor Alan Paterson OBE, an international expert in legal aid. He pointed out as long ago as 2010, when spending per capita in England and Wales was £38, compared with £29 in Scotland, that much of that difference was down to the success of reform of court procedures in Scotland, both civil and criminal, leading to reduced legal aid spending.

The recent independent review of legal aid in Scotland highlighted other ways in which the legal aid budget could be reduced. Indeed, it has been reduced there since 2011. Falling recorded crime means fewer court cases and less criminal legal aid, as does greater use of diversion from the courts through fines. More sensible use of civil courts and jurisdictions has contributed to a drop in civil legal aid spending.

In short, legal aid is a vital part of ensuring access to justice and the rule of law. It should never have been made a victim of austerity, and it was a totally false economy to make it one. LASPO should be ripped up—it was a bad piece of legislation and has proved a total failure. Tinkering around the edges is no longer enough. A comprehensive system is required for England and Wales, and it is required urgently.

3.54 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.
I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this important debate. He pointed out the key target of those legal aid reforms—that those who were most in need would get legal aid. That is why we are having the debate—because we do not believe that that principle has been upheld. He put three key asks to the Minister, and I hope that she will respond to them.

It is essential that, regardless of someone’s wealth or background, our justice system should be easily accessible so that everyone is on the same playing field when it comes to the law of the land. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) gave us a historical perspective on how that principle came about. Government cuts of a third in overall spending on legal aid since 2012 have, however, made a mockery of that principle. To quote the words of the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the pendulum has swung “too far” the other way.

There are many reasons why people may find that they need legal aid, unfortunately, and we have heard many of them today from speeches and numerous interventions, in particular from Opposition Members. Very real problems have been addressed, to do with issues including housing, benefits, those with disabilities, and immigration, where people simply feel as though they are on their own. Like me, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) does not come from a legal background, but as an employer or business had been referred to see a legal professional. That is why we are having the debate—because we do not believe that that principle has been upheld.

When people have fallen on hard times, the last thing that they can cope with is a lengthy battle to get legal representation or, worse, learning to represent themselves in court, and yet that is exactly what the Government are forcing people to do. Legal professionals have warned of a sharp rise in the number of people forced to represent themselves in court to access the justice that they deserve. Will the Minister tell us what rise in litigants in person has been?

Recently, we learned that the Equality and Human Rights Commission is launching an official inquiry into whether legal aid cuts have left victims of discrimination barred from justice, after BuzzFeed News revealed that not one person with a discrimination complaint against an employer or business had been referred to see a legal aid lawyer in 2016-17. The number of people receiving any publicly funded legal advice at all in discrimination cases has fallen by almost 60% since the Government’s changes. Will the Minister tell us whether there has been a 60% drop in discrimination? I sincerely doubt that.

A particularly pernicious aspect of the Government’s attacks on legal aid is the impact on victims of domestic violence. It is well known that abusers often use the legal system to continue their abuse. There are a number of issues with the Legal Aid Agency’s assessment of women’s financial eligibility for legal aid via the means test. Such tests too often result in women making unaffordable contributions, or even having to sell their home to pay legal fees. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), from Plaid Cymru, talked about the re-traumatisation process that that puts survivors of domestic violence through.

Justice is being denied not only in those areas of law that have been specifically removed from the scope of legal aid. According to the Law Commission, advice deserts have appeared throughout the country, because the huge legal aid cuts have had the knock-on effect of forcing providers and law centres to shut up shop, providing a barrier to legal aid even for those who are eligible. That point was made particularly forcefully by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) talked about the shortage of reliable legal advice and about the danger of unqualified organisations giving advice. She discussed the impact of court closures on access to justice. As a fellow—sister—Member of Parliament who represents a town, I know about the public transport challenges and all the other difficulties that court closures will create in constituencies such as ours.

Charities such as Shelter have warned that thousands of people a year are being made homeless because they cannot find lawyers to help them to prevent eviction. Vulnerable people are being left to fend for themselves, which is totally unacceptable. The human cost of LASPO is clear, but surely there should be some benefit from the Government’s decisions. One might assume that the Government are saving money through the cuts, which could be reinvested in other worthy causes. Yet, as is so often the case with the Tory austerity agenda, the cuts are economically short-sighted. As a result, the taxpayer is footing a huge bill.

The Government recently revealed that the justice budget has, in real terms, fallen by 40% since 2010-11. The Law Society, however, has found that the restriction on access to early legal advice and the sharp rise in litigants in person mean that many more cases end up in lengthy court hearings, rather than being resolved elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) brought in her experience as a former trade union lawyer of how early legal advice can help the system to run smoothly and economically. Mediation starts have fallen by 55% since 2012, forcing into the courts more cases that previously could have been settled.

Does the Minister agree with the President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, who said that LASPO cuts are likely to provide a “false economy” because of increased pressure on courts? The charity Citizens Advice estimates that every £1 of legal aid spent on housing advice could potentially save £2.34 for the public purse, and that lack of support to resolve a case early means potentially far more costly court proceedings down the line. Those hidden costs must be factored into any assessment of the savings made from legal aid cuts. Will the Government, as part of their review of legal aid, publish their own cost-benefit analysis of the wider impact of reducing early legal advice?

A Labour Government will return all funding for early legal advice, because we know that prevention is better than cure. We will re-establish early advice entitlements in the family courts, restore legal advice in all housing cases to protect 50,000 households a year against rogue landlords, and review the legal aid means test. We will change the rules for legal aid at inquests, so that bereaved families are not left to fend for themselves against an inequality of arms. That is a fitting proposal, given that it is a year to the day since the chair of the Hillsborough Independent Panel and adviser to the

[ Gloria De Piero ]

...
Home Secretary called for legal aid to be granted to families who lost loved ones in the disaster, so that they can be represented at inquests. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government have any plans to do the same?

There have been changes this year to the advocates’ graduated fee scheme by which legal aid criminal barristers are paid, provoking a backlash both from lawyers and in this House. Labour forced a vote against those measures. The Government responded to the threat of further action from lawyers with a Ministry of Justice announcement of £15 million to go into a new criminal Bar funding scheme. There are now complaints that that deal could be reneged on, and many are concerned that the funding will be more like £8 million. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government will honour the letter and spirit of that deal, and confirm a date for the implementation of the new scheme?

We welcome the review of the impact of LASPO, but for many victims it comes far too late and without a clear timetable or commitment to act on any recommendations. Will the Minister confirm when the review will conclude, which organisations the Government have consulted and when they plan to introduce any recommendations? For the sake of the thousands of people harmed by those measures, the Government must take seriously the concerns of service providers, legal professionals, court staff, the chair of the Justice Committee and victims themselves, and act to restore access to justice for the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I understand the Minister has an enormous number of points to respond to, but if she could give Mr Andy Slaughter a chance to wind up the debate, I am sure we would all appreciate it.

4.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing the debate. As the shadow Justice Minister when the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 was going through the House, he has considerable knowledge of the legislation. He mentioned the law centre in this constituency, but he did not mention that he has been a board member of that law centre for 30 years. I am sure he has contributed to the services it provides. Like him, I pay tribute to the work that Carol Storer has done over the past decade as the director of the Legal Aid Practitioners Group. This week, she was rightly nominated for LawWorks’ outstanding contribution to access to justice award.

We have heard some very powerful speeches from across the House, and I have listened carefully, as have my officials. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) made the important point that this debate is about matters that affect people’s lives. At various points, an impartial observer might have thought that this Government spend a paltry sum, or no money at all, on legal aid but that is not the case at all. Legal aid has always been and remains available for the highest priority cases where people are at their most vulnerable: when they are about to be made homeless or to lose their children, or they are accused of a criminal offence that may result in the loss of their liberty.

I want to make it clear, as I have many times, that the Government make a significant investment in legal aid. We spend £1.6 billion a year on it, which is a fifth of the Ministry of Justice’s budget. That is in addition to other sources of funding to ensure justice and the fair determination of rights: in the last three years we have spent almost £6.5 million in addition through the litigants in person support strategy.

The Government have not stood still on legal aid. Over the past year, we have improved its provision in a number of areas. In January we broadened the accepted evidence for domestic violence and reduced all time limits. In February we broadened the scope of legal aid for prisoners, and in June we updated the legal guidance for inquests on deaths in custody. I recently committed to laying an amendment to LASPO, to bring immigration matters for unaccompanied and separated migrant children into the scope of legal aid. We are also reviewing the provision of legal aid for parties involved in inquest proceedings, examining both the scope and eligibility criteria.

Robert Neill: I recognise and welcome the positive changes that have happened since the Minister has been in the Department. On the total spend, does she agree that, although we provide significant sums and compare well with other common law jurisdictions, a fifth of Ministry of Justice expenditure is a fifth of 1% of total Government expenditure? When we look at the scope for additional funding, we are looking at increasing a fraction of a fraction.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is very knowledgeable and experienced in many matters, including this one. He does a great amount of work on behalf of the legal aid professions and people who use the services we provide through Justice. As always, he makes an important point. I have listened carefully to all the points that have been made in this debate and throughout my time as Minister.

I will answer some of the many points made in the debate—you are right that I will not have time to respond to all of them, Mr Bailey. The hon. Member for Hammersmith spoke about the provisions in the Budget, but failed to mention the provision to build a new prison at Glen Parva, £30 million for prisons, and £20.5 million for the wider justice system.

A number of Members mentioned that legal aid is not provided in a number of areas. It is important to be clear about where legal aid is available and where it is not; we are reviewing where it is not available and has been taken out of scope. One reason why people do not access legal aid may be that they do not think it is available at all. Where we provide it, we need to say loud and clear that it is available. Some Members mentioned the lack of availability for housing and medical negligence, but the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) rightly acknowledged that legal aid is available when a person’s house is at risk of repossession.

Ms Buck: I acknowledge that point, but that was in the context of my arguing that these things are only as useful as the number of providers. A central argument advanced by the Opposition is about the loss of providers—the fact that people are not bidding for contracts. Does the Minister recognise and acknowledge that point?
Lucy Frazer: It was actually the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) who said that legal aid for housing was not available, and I was trying to highlight that the hon. Member for Westminster North recognised that it is. She makes an important point about legal aid providers. When civil legal aid contracts were recently put out to tender, 1,700 bidders took part, but we need to ensure that people who want to do this work are available to do it across the country, not just in high-density areas, and we need to ensure that there is provision in more sparsely populated areas where those contracts are less lucrative.

Stuart C. McDonald: What does the Minister say to the Justice Committee’s suggestion that, although housing may be within scope when people get to the stage of impending homelessness, we should invest smaller sums earlier to avoid catastrophe in the first place?

Lucy Frazer: The point that it is useful to nip problems in the bud and address them at the outset, so that they do not escalate, has been made and heard. Changes were made to LASPO to ensure that legal aid was available where people were at their most vulnerable. On clinical negligence, we should make clear that legal aid is available for compensation claims in respect of neurological trauma caused to children early in life due to negligence by medical professionals. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith recognised, by putting such things in the scope of legal aid, we are protecting the most vulnerable.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned social security claims. We are introducing significant technological changes—things such as digitisation and better communication with judges using technology—to make the tribunal system much more accessible.

Many Members, including the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), mentioned family law. LASPO rightly removed most private family matters from the scope of legal aid, but legal aid remains available for mediation in certain family disputes where parties meet the eligibility criteria. Since November 2014, legal aid has covered the costs of the mediation information and assessment meeting and the first mediation session for both parties, even if just one is eligible for legal aid.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith mentioned exceptional case funding. Let me update the figures he gave. The number of people making applications and the number of applications granted have both increased. Some 746 applications for ECF were received in the first quarter of 2018, of which 59%—390—were granted. That is the highest proportion and number of grants since the scheme began.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) both mentioned domestic violence. Legal aid is available to those seeking protection from an abuser in domestic abuse cases, and it was granted in more than 13,000 cases last year.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) raised important points about Wales. She has asked parliamentary questions on a number of matters, and I am happy to meet her to discuss the issues she has raised.

I was interested to hear the points by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) about children. I was pleased to meet him earlier this week to discuss some of those issues.

It is important to set out where legal aid is available, but we recognise the impact of the changes made by the coalition Government in 2012, which many Members highlighted. As all Members know, my Department is looking at the impacts of LASPO. The hon. Member for Hammersmith said he is looking for positive news, but as a former shadow Justice Minister, he knows as well as I do that it would be wrong to pre-empt the outcome of the review. We will respond at the end of the year.

I am happy to set out the process, which I outlined at the APPG on legal aid earlier this week. The evidence-gathering process has been comprehensive. My officials met more than 80 individuals and organisations from across the justice system to gather evidence, and they held two rounds of consultative group meetings with organisations, representatives and academics from across the justice system. At a third round of meetings, we will examine opportunities to consider further legal support. Officials will meet the Family Justice Council to discuss its concerns and recommendations in further detail, and are due to have a second meeting with the Civil Justice Council to explore its recommendations further.

I have held a number of instructive roundtables with those who have used our justice system, both with and without legal aid. I have met a number of Members of the House of Lords—last week I sat down with Lord Bach and other members of his commission on access to justice, and I have met Lord Low. Last week, I met the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I have also met many parliamentarians, and individuals from the advice and third sector who work with the most vulnerable in our society.

Alongside those meetings, much material has been submitted throughout the review, and we are considering that. It is clear that there are many issues to consider, from the stage at which advice is sought to types of provider and methods of provision. Many experts highlighted the value that technology can bring to individuals to navigate their rights in the court process.

We now use technology in every part of our lives, and justice should not be immune from that advancement. That is why, through the courts reform programme, the Government are investing £1 billion in updating our justice system for the 21st century. That programme is helping people to access court better, at the same time as changing outdated back-office systems. People can now apply for divorce online, we are trialling online applications for probate, and people can be updated about their social security claim through their mobile phone. Our reforms help vulnerable witnesses to give pre-recorded evidence so they do not need to see their attacker in court, and they enable those who find it difficult to travel due to disability or age to take part in proceedings by video link. That investment will transform how people experience the justice system with digital services, making justice more accessible and straightforward as well as using taxpayers’ money wisely.

Andy Slaughter: I sense that the Minister is drawing her remarks to a close, but I wonder whether she will address a few more of my points. First, online and telephone services are valuable, but some people need face-to-face services. Will she look at that? Secondly, I know there is a separate review going on in relation to the representation of deceased people’s relatives at inquests. Does she know what stage that has reached? Will it report, or will it form part of the same review?
Finally, will the Minister look at the independence of the Legal Aid Agency? There are serious concerns that, in specific cases or more generally, there has been interference in the agency’s decisions because it is not sufficiently at arm’s length from the Government. We may need to deal with that as a discrete issue, but anything she can say to reassure us on that would be helpful.

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to answer those points. We did not need to commit to looking at inquests, because LASPO made no changes to the inquests system, but the Government recognise that it is an important part of access to justice and we are looking at it. However, that is not the same review; it is running alongside the legal aid review.

Will the hon. Gentleman remind me of his first point? On his third point, the Legal Aid Agency is independent.

Andy Slaughter: On inquests, I simply wanted to know, if the review is separate, when it is likely to report. My first point was about face-to-face advice.

Lucy Frazer: Ah, yes. Of course it is important to consider all methods of provision. We have the telephone gateway, and many advice centres are looking at digital methods of offering advice. We do of course fund face-to-face advice at the moment in the provision of legal aid, and it forms an important part of giving advice.

As I mentioned, we are in the process of carrying out a legal aid review. All today’s contributions, along with the previous debate in this Chamber secured by the hon. Member for Westminster North, yesterday’s meeting with the APPG and the contributions and submissions in the other meetings we have held, are an important part of that process. I thank all hon. Members who spoke for their contributions, which we will take on board.

4.19 pm

Andy Slaughter: It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey, for the second part of the debate. I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I have. I will not abuse the position of having time left to speak for more than the two minutes normal for the response. I am grateful for that time.

I am grateful to everybody who has spoken and for the responses we had from the Front Benchers. There is so much consensus in the room that one might wonder what all the fuss is about. I know most of the speeches came from the Opposition, but there was an authoritative contribution from the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), several interventions from the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and the contribution from the Minister. We have heard unanimity on the importance of legal aid, as well as an appreciation of how it needs to work and why it is not working at the moment.

Perhaps that is not surprising. As Members of Parliament we are perhaps in a unique position to see the usefulness and the essential nature of legal aid, from the top and the bottom. We see it in our surgeries, where people bring us increasingly legal problems and we think about how we can resolve them. People have not been well served by the system but are now doubly not being well served in having their grievance addressed. Many colleagues gave examples about areas such as housing and welfare benefits.

A lot of points were made about the contribution of legal aid to the rule of law, whether in ensuring that those accused of criminal offences and threatened with the loss of their liberty have proper representation to avoid miscarriages of justice, or about the broader principle—not simply an individual’s cause being addressed—of policing good behaviour and ensuring that the institutions that we all rely upon give a proper service and do not let down the people they know. Those institutions could be anything from the Department for Work and Pensions to the NHS. Those are essential functions.

The problem is that many of us do not have confidence that the real damage that LASPO has done so far will be addressed. I understand why the Minister cannot say more today, but I hope that she found it useful to hear the comments that have been made. She knows what we are looking for. However the money has to be found and however persuasive she has to be with her colleagues in the Department and in the Treasury, she knows that the savings achieved so far are way in excess of what was intended or predicted, but she also knows that the collapse in service has been far greater than was provided for. That in itself should give the opportunity to make good some of the worst deficiencies that have occurred since then.

I am grateful to everybody who has spoken today. I am also grateful to those from Hammersmith and Fulham Law Centre who have attended the debate. I know that they will be taking the message back to many of their fellow practitioners that we are listening, we are engaged and hopefully we are informed, but it is the Government’s response that we are waiting on before, as the Minister said, the end of the year.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the future of legal aid.

4.23 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall  
Tuesday 6 November 2018

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

Synthetic Cannabinoids: Reclassification

9.30 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Howarth. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue in a debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to do so.

I am continuing my campaign for reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids, known as synthetic cannabis, Mamba or Spice. These drugs are becoming a serious national problem. I want to raise the profile of this issue to make people aware of the devastating impact of the drugs in my constituency of Mansfield and across the entire UK. It is time to take proper action on the drugs and get Mamba and Spice off our streets.

Contrary to the assumption of some in Parliament, I do not believe that reclassification is a silver bullet or a quick-fix answer. In my recent correspondence with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is responsible for public health and primary care, he stated that "synthetic cannabinoid use is often part of a complex set of health and social issues; there is no single solution, and short-term approaches can just displace the problem".

I share that sentiment. We clearly need an holistic approach to deal with these drugs. However, reclassification, although not the only solution, is a step in the right direction to give our police and local services the powers that they need to deal effectively with users and dealers. The current class B classification is limiting the action that local services and the police can take, which is further damaging some of our most deprived areas, where resources are already stretched.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On the point about giving the police more powers, reclassifying what are termed SCRs—synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists—as class A drugs would not grant any additional enforcement powers to the police.

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I disagree. My local police are adamant that on the street, in the town centre, they have more powers to deal with things such as heroin use than they do to deal with these drugs, and obviously the sentencing powers available through the judicial system are different. At the moment, when the police deal with things such as Mamba and Spice in Mansfield town centre, they do not work on the basis of drugs offences, but use antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour orders, because they do not have the opportunity, through drugs legislation, to record what we are discussing today as offences.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I would like to reinforce the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Does not the fact that so many police and crime commissioners are writing to us, calling on us to make the very changes that he suggests, reinforce the point that the police will attach a greater priority to these drugs if they are reclassified as class A drugs?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention: he is absolutely right. In the wake of an Adjournment debate that I held in July, 20 police and crime commissioners wrote to this Minister about the issue, stressing exactly what I am saying this morning: unless these drugs are taken seriously and prioritised by police forces in the way class A drugs are, the police will continue to struggle to deal with them at local level.

The point of reclassification is not to criminalise vulnerable users, but to prevent those users from being exploited by drug dealers and to get them the help that they need. The health Green Paper, announced only yesterday in an initial policy paper entitled "Prevention is better than cure", is a welcome development. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said, focusing on the responsibilities of patients is not about penalising people, but about helping them to make better choices.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Before my hon. Friend gets too much into the issue of patients, may I bring him back to the issue of policing? My local police have been doing a phenomenal bit of work cracking down on drug activity, and they made a number of arrests last week. They are concerned that there is not strong enough sentencing for the drug barons at the top, who too often are let off, basically scot-free. Does my hon. Friend agree that reclassification should be coupled with stronger sentencing for those peddling these drugs?

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I for one think that we can use this week's announcement by the think that we can use this week's announcement by the

Synthetic Cannabinoids: Reclassification

Reclassification

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Health Secretary and the funding that will be available for our NHS in the coming years to explore ways in which we can put in place community and primary care services for homeless and other vulnerable people and, for these drugs, preventive services. The preventive aspect is exactly what is needed from that funding and what could make a big impact. As I said at the outset, reclassification is not a silver bullet—it is not the only answer. It comes with a need for preventive services in our communities. They are two sides of the same coin when it comes to delivering for my constituents on this issue.

Mansfield District Council and the local police have done everything they can under the current framework to help users, and I commend them for their hard work and dedication. Alongside a local charity called Framework, the council and the police have launched a joint operation to tackle antisocial behaviour relating to the use of Mamba. In the town centre alone, one sergeant, six constables and six police community support officers are working closely with the council’s neighbourhood wardens and antisocial behaviour officers to deal with the problem; that is in addition to CCTV. That demonstrates the enormity of the issue. There are more police officers working in the town centre than perhaps ever before, but the police are still being stretched by this problem. Some kind of drug-related episode, whether it is someone passing out or causing another kind of issue for residents, is still a daily occurrence.

We should not automatically assume that all homeless people are taking these drugs. Of course they are not, but because of the incredibly low cost, there is a high correlation. To some extent, this has become the drug of choice. A dedicated taskforce is focusing on the root causes of homelessness by giving individuals the support that they need to end the cycle of dependency on drugs and alcohol and helping them to turn their lives around. Three outreach workers, who specialise in homelessness, mental health and substance misuse, are supporting the community in Mansfield and trying to build relationships with users, even when their help is rejected, as it often is.

Mansfield is learning from projects in other areas in order to work on its own best practice when dealing with this issue. More than 50 people shared their experience at a recent Mamba seminar, which will provide further guidance for the local authority. I have met people from the Nottingham Mamba clinic to explore new approaches, hear their experience and try to share their work in my constituency. Interestingly, even the drugs workers on the ground in the Nottingham Mamba clinic agree that reclassification would be an important aspect of managing the problem locally. A police inspector in my constituency, Nick Butler, says that the College of Policing has acknowledged that Mansfield is leading the way in dealing with Mamba users and tackling antisocial behaviour and rough sleeping. That is commendable.

We must accept that, in some cases, it gets to the point where enough is enough. Although we can offer individuals help until we are blue in the face, the fact is that people can refuse help or sometimes, for a variety of complex reasons, are not able to accept help. Instead, they end up in an endless cycle of reoffending. We have reached the point where existing powers to deal with repeat offenders no longer have an impact, and local police are calling for further support, as we saw in the example of the police and crime commissioners writing to Government.

Following my debate in July about the societal impact of these drugs, I asked the Government for two things. First, I asked for a national strategy to share best practice, seek medical intervention and support local areas in combating the issue and, secondly, I asked the Government to consider reclassifying these drugs from class B, comparable to cannabis, to class A, in line with heroin.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the debate. I hope that we all agree that the point about best practice should be endorsed, but does he agree that we need wider community buy-in, particularly across our urban communities as well as rural communities? Those communities have to buy in to the best practice process. They have to see evidence of outcomes, whether that involves the courts and police action or wider community resistance to this sort of activity.

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention: I agree. Ultimately, we all want to see tangible outcomes on the ground in our communities. We can make legislation here and change the classification, but that has to be bought into; it has to be delivered by local service providers and the police on the ground. My priority, the most important thing for me, is that my constituents in Mansfield town centre feel safer as a result. That is exactly what we are after. In the aftermath of that debate in July, 20 police and crime commissioners wrote to the Government in support of reclassification, which has received cross-party support and is backed by my local police leaders. Nottinghamshire County Council and other county councils have written to the Government on this issue.

Spice was originally sold as a legal high, and synthetic cannabinoids were developed as an alternative to cannabis, which leads to a common misconception that these drugs are not hard drugs. It is understandable that they would initially have been made class B drugs. However, the comparison of synthetic cannabinoids to cannabis is entirely inaccurate and their impacts are very different.

I cannot emphasise enough that reclassifying these drugs has no connection with cannabis or medical marijuana. In my view, there is a great deal of sense in the medicinal use of cannabis in some cases. I do not argue with that; indeed, in this debate I do not seek to suggest anything at all about cannabis, frankly. In fact, I want to make the point that the two—cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids—are not comparable and that these psychoactive drugs are not the same thing at all. We need to stop treating cannabis and synthetic cannabis as if they are the same thing, and we need to reclassify synthetic cannabis.

It does not make sense that, in accordance with the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, synthetic cannabinoids are put in the same class as cannabis regarding relative harmfulness. The physical and psychological impacts of synthetic cannabis are more comparable to those of class A drugs, such as ketamine or heroin, yet that seriousness is not reflected in law. Seizures, heart attacks and chest pains are common physical problems, and synthetic cannabis users can experience frightening visions or hallucinations.
Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again, yet again he is making a really important point. I heard a tragic story when I visited my local prison recently. Three prisoners died after taking drugs. All three were also taking epilepsy drugs and there may be an issue there. With these synthetic drugs, we simply do not know what they do or how they interact with common medicines. Is that not another reason for treating this matter more seriously?

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and I absolutely agree. We have seen the impact of these drugs and not only on users; there have been cases of prison officers having to go home sick, having inhaled fumes exhaled by people taking these drugs. The impact is not only on users themselves but on the broader community, which—absolutely—is another reason why this matter needs to be taken more seriously.

It is not yet necessarily recognised in the literature on this subject, but there can be problems for users as bad as bleeding from the eyes and bleeding from orifices. Similarly, teeth falling out has been described by long-term users as a side effect of these drugs, and such things are not comparable with the outcomes and side effects of other class B drugs. It is ridiculous that these symptoms do not warrant a higher classification for these drugs.

Unlike natural cannabis, synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, or SCRs, do not contain cannabidiol, or CBD, a chemical that is sometimes sold in our high-street shops, and which appears to possess antipsychotic properties. The psychotic symptoms that occur relatively frequently following SCRA consumption might be linked to the high potency of the drugs and the absence of CBD. In many cases, however, we do not know what is actually in these drugs. That is partly why it is so difficult to have a clear national treatment plan for users; the drugs are manufactured locally and ingredients vary across different regions. Sometimes, the main ingredient is nail varnish remover, but at other times it is not, and the impact on health and symptoms can vary greatly.

Cases have been reported where users choose to take heroin instead of Mamba, as there is more treatment available for heroin. There is no substitute for Mamba in the way that methadone can be used to help heroin addicts to come off heroin. I have been told by service providers off the record that they would prefer to treat people who take heroin, as their understanding is greater and the pathways to support and help are clearer. The fact that drugs workers say, “Actually, I would rather you take this class A drug than a class B drug”, suggests that we have not got classification right.

I have been told anecdotally that these drugs are far more addictive than heroin or cocaine. An article in The Economist emphasised the difficulty faced by outreach workers as they try to help users. Although heroin addicts often have four or five hours of lucidity a day, Mamba is often chain-smoked continuously by users throughout the day. As Members can imagine, that makes having a coherent conversation with a Mamba user a nearly impossible task.

Last weekend, The Sunday Times contained a very interesting article by Rosamund Irwin, which included an account from a user about how much worse the outcomes of taking Spice are compared with those of taking any other drug. In the article, Karen from Blackpool said:

“I’ve been on heroin for over 30 years. I’ve tried every drug, and Spice is by far the most horrible. You can function on heroin, but on Spice I thought I was coming off the world.”

In the same article, Karina, who is from the Salvation Army, says that these drugs “rob people of their personality; it’s very different to heroin in that you can still have a conversation with a heroin user, but when people are on Spice their body is there, but they are not.”

The impact of these drugs is immense and affects towns across the whole of the UK. Not only is the impact on individuals worse than that of many class A drugs, but the impact on others and on public safety is arguably the worst aspect of all.

I want to see heavier penalties for manufacturers and dealers; I want to see work being done to shut down supply chains for the ingredients used in these drugs; and I want to see that increased risk and difficulty make life harder for manufacturers. In the meantime, I want the police to act, in order to keep people safe on our streets.

I have spoken to the staff of many local services in Mansfield and Nottinghamshire who have seen at first hand the impact of these drugs on our towns centres. It is clear that the low price of Mamba and Spice is a key problem. At the cost of as little as £5 for four or five hits, synthetic cannabis is one of the cheapest drugs on the market, but it is also one of the strongest. The effects of these drugs can leave users resembling zombies, slumped in a state of semi-consciousness, sometimes foaming at the mouth and sometimes passed out in the street.

It is uncomfortable enough seeing such things as an adult; it is devastating having to explain to your four-year-old child why there are people passed out on the ground in the market square in Mansfield town centre. That situation has clearly had a negative impact on town centres and local economies. It causes anxiety among shoppers and business owners, reduces footfall and discourages families from spending the day in the town centre.

These drugs have put an extra strain on ambulance services around the country. Figures from South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust showed that between August 2016 and July 2017 there were 157 calls related to synthetic cannabis. That jumped up to 960 calls in the following year. Most of the time, the users hop back up after 20 minutes or so; they are absolutely fine and do not need an ambulance, but that time and money has been wasted. This issue not only affects my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop; it impacts on constituencies around the UK and it is getting worse. The Government need to act now to stop things from worsening further.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate. Having made those points about ambulance services, he might be interested to know that last year in Torquay some users of these drugs were getting two or even three ambulance visits a day because of the very situation that he is describing, namely that most users recover quickly after an incident. Again that reinforces the fact that these are not class B drugs. They look like class A drugs, they work like class A drugs, and they should be class A drugs.
Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I totally agree with him. I have seen examples of that and myself. One of the problems with using these drugs in Mansfield town centre is next to a statue that is right outside my office. Indeed, one of my members of staff has been outside resuscitating people on a regular basis. The challenge is that not only is an ambulance sent, even though it may not actually be needed, but if that drug user is put into an ambulance and taken to an accident and emergency, they often require more resource in A&E than the average punter. So the resource drain from the NHS as a result of this issue is absolutely huge; I agree with my hon. Friend in that regard.

I echo the sentiment of Notinghamshire County Council that the illegal use of these drugs is a threat to public health and a matter of public concern. As 20 PCCs have outlined, these drugs are causing one of the most severe public health issues we have faced in decades. Quite frankly, enough is enough for me. I want my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop to feel safe, and I want the police and local council to have the powers to ensure that users are dealt with effectively. The localised manufacturing methods of these drugs vary, due to the range of different ingredients that dealers use. This variability means that the drugs vary in strength and quality, and the effects of consuming one hit of Mamba can vary hugely from week to week, from dealer to dealer, and from town to town.

Symptoms are unpredictable, and as a result medical intervention can be challenging. I have contacted NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and it is clear that no organisation has yet taken responsibility for providing best practice in dealing with this issue. I do not believe that each clinical commissioning group should individually have to come up with its own guidance. The Government need to be proactive, and they must work on a national strategy to tackle a growing national problem.

These drugs are not only cheap, they are also accessible. I have literally seen bags of Mamba lying in the street outside my office. It is not expensive to replace, and the current laws and penalties for selling Mamba and Spice mean that there is not a real deterrent for dealers. If I can walk down the high street and pick up a bag of it—literally pick it up for free in the street—then it is clear that people do not fear the repercussions of being caught with these drugs.

The raw ingredients to make these drugs can be found freely available online and ordered, and then concocted as Mamba and Spice here in the UK. A recent investigation by The Sunday Times proved how easy it is for UK drugs gangs to import dangerous chemicals from China to cook up these drugs in their local areas. An undercover reporter was able to import industrial-grade chemicals, including hydrochloric acid and sulphuric acid, to make Mamba in just 14 days. This method means that gangs are making much bigger profits; £50 of ingredients can make 2 lb of spice, which is worth nearly £10,000.

There need to be stronger judicial consequences, particularly for manufacturing and dealing in these drugs; currently, the profit outweighs the risk. It is only by putting the fear of God into manufacturers and cutting off supply lines that we can hope to make a tangible impact on the ground. Tougher penalties for dealers and manufacturers would lead to increased prices for users, and more powers for the police to protect local residents.

A recent conversation I had with a local police inspector highlighted the enormity of the task of dealing with Mamba users while the police have very restricted powers. Since April this year, one particular Mamba user in Mansfield has been arrested 12 times and sent to prison twice. While in prison, this repeat offender did not receive any education or rehabilitation, which was a huge missed opportunity in itself and led to an immediate breach of his criminal behaviour order when he entered Mansfield town centre on his release. I was informed only last week that he had been arrested within 24 hours of being released, after serving a 16-week sentence, and has consequently received another eight weeks. There are countless such examples around the country of people going round and round the system with very lenient consequences for their actions, and of their not getting the support they need and not fearing the repercussions—rearrest and reconviction.

Following the advice of my right hon. Friend the Minister, I wrote a cross-party letter to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. I am pleased that the council will consider the classification of psychoactive drugs in a review that is due to begin shortly. More importantly, the Home Office is due to review the operation of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 this month in accordance with section 58 of the Act, which commits it to doing so within 30 months of implementation. I look forward to the Government’s response.

This severe problem does not only affect my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop; it has far-reaching consequences for all areas of society around the country. I praise our local services. They do their best with the available resources to deal with the growing epidemic, but it gets to a point at which there must be national recognition of the problem and a plan to reduce the burden on them. I am calling on the Government to reclassify synthetic cannabinoids, so that local authorities have more power to take action that will get users the help they need and keep them out of the judicial system, and that will mean heavier penalties for dealers and increased risk for manufacturers. Most importantly, from the perspective of the bulk of the public, it will keep people safe, so that they do not feel scared or intimidated when going about their business in our towns and cities. We need to meet a severe problem with severe consequences.

Reclassification would also show a clear distinction between synthetic cannabinoids and cannabis. As I have demonstrated numerous times during my speech, the physical and physiological impact of these drugs requires a class A classification.

I understand absolutely that users need support and that preventing addiction is the desirable course of action, and I welcome the news that the Health Secretary is looking into NHS funding for preventive services. I raise that side of the coin regularly too, particularly with the Department of Health and Social Care; I have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on numerous occasions. Reclassification is not the silver bullet. It is far too simplistic to believe that all users will want to accept help, and wrong to think that we should not act when users make life hell for innocent people and town centre businesses. My first instinct is to protect my constituents.
I want Mansfield town centre to be a lively, upbeat place again, somewhere people look forward to visiting and to which they will return time and again. Mansfield is full of fantastic local shops and businesses that already face difficulties of their own. I am keen to help regenerate the town centre, and I know that the Government are working to support that—we can see it in many of the Budget measures from last week—but small retail businesses receiving a cut to their business rates will not attract people to town centres if people feel they are a hostile environment into which they do not want to bring their children. It is not right to let a small minority of people have such a huge impact on entire towns and the lives of thousands by turning our town centres into places where people fear to go. We cannot continue to let our children see this behaviour and think it is normal.

The issue peaked locally, in Mansfield and Warsop, back in July, at which time I was receiving multiple messages every day from constituents complaining about their experience with users in the town centre. The problem has worsened over a short time, and I do not think we have the ability to wait any longer. If dealers and manufacturers do not face harsh repercussions, what assurance will our town be in this time next year, or in five years’ time?

The issue cannot be ignored until it goes away. I urge the Government to consider it closely, to work with the advisory council and to reclassify these drugs so that we can regain control of our town centres.

9.53 am

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this vital debate on an urgent issue for my constituents. I am immensely grateful to those I work with locally who are on the frontline, supporting users and the communities in which they live. Organisations such as Saltbox, Brighter Futures, Voices and Number 11 work tirelessly to deal with the consequences of the new substances. They are on the frontline with our brave public servants—the police, paramedics and A&E professionals—who deal with the consequences day in, day out. The huge spike in the use of synthetic cannabinoids such as Spice and Black Mamba and synthetic psychoactive substances such as Monkey Dust is causing immeasurable harm to my communities and drawing new battle lines in the war on drugs.

I am very proud to represent the people of Stoke-on-Trent. My city truly is a wonderful place to live, and I have a duty to protect it and to fight for my constituents. For too long our city has been at the epicentre of this growing crisis. Synthetic drugs such as Monkey Dust and Black Mamba are too easily available on our streets and can be found for as little as £2 or £3 a hit. The drugs are cheap, powerful and dangerous, and are wreaking havoc on our communities.

On 4 September, it was reported that Staffordshire police had responded to no fewer than 950 Monkey Dust-related incidents in the previous three months alone—an average of 10 calls a day—and the situation is only getting worse. We are in the grip of an epidemic that has devastating consequences, not just for users but for the wider public. Every week I am confronted by a new horror story from one of my constituents, of threatening and intimidating behaviour, of drug users passed out in alleyways and parks, and of growing violence between rival dealers and gangs. My constituents too often have to tell me about the obstacle course of rubbish and drug paraphernalia they have to traverse on their way to work, and about the fear that prevents them from letting their children leave the house alone. One person wrote to me last week describing their street as something out of a zombie film, and another stopped me while I was out canvassing to tell me that drug users were walking up and down their street at night trying peoples’ door handles in an attempt to get into their homes.

The most harrowing story I have heard concerns a young woman who had a drug user jump into her car outside her house and refuse to get out. My constituent’s four-year-old daughter who was in the car was forced to leap out in terror and she is now terrified. The same individual later forced entry into someone else’s house on that street and assaulted them. That is what we are dealing with. That is what my constituents—decent, hard-working people—are forced to endure, and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Our police do incredible work in tackling the problem, but they are stretched to their limit, and with Staffordshire police set to lose a further £6.6 million of funding, our local thin blue line is set to get even thinner. However, this is not just an enforcement issue. The people whose lives are being ruined by the drugs need support, whether treatment for alcohol and substance abuse, mental health support or, as in many cases, support to tackle the homelessness and rough sleeping that all too often leads to people turning to drugs and alcohol as a comfort and an escape—they are clearly self-medicating. All too often, that assistance simply is not there. Deep cuts to drug treatment and recovery support have made it much harder for people to seek help, and have left the police and social services with nowhere to refer users to for treatment.

Worse still, the low classification of these synthetic drugs means that they are frequently designated a low priority. What little support remains is instead directed towards those struggling with opiates and other hard drugs. In Stoke-on-Trent, local support charities have told me that they are supporting people who have started using heroin so that they will be eligible for the rehab support they have been denied when trying to get off Monkey Dust. Such is the desperation of those seeking to get clean that they are resorting to even more dangerous and destructive substances to access the help they need.

Even the provision we have in my great city is under threat. This year, Stoke-on-Trent City Council decided to cut drug and alcohol services by £751,000. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and I recently wrote to Ann James, the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, urging her to reconsider the cuts and to recognise the need to focus our energies on the new synthetic substances. Our pleas fell on deaf ears, and she should be ashamed.

More than anything, we need the Government to recognise the scale of the problem and to provide the resources we need before the potential of a generation disappears in a puff of smoke. I hope the Minister comes away from the debate with a clearer understanding of the urgency of the situation in towns and cities across the UK.
9.59 am

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my colleague, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth).

I congratulate the hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to further my own efforts to counter the blight of drugs in Stoke-on-Trent South. Indeed, I recently met the Minister’s colleague, the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, to discuss the scourge of gangs, particularly those who are pushing and profiting from the misery caused by Spice. I also discussed the significant escalation of another synthetic drug in Stoke-on-Trent, Monkey Dust, to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred. I am grateful to Home Office Ministers for their work to address the growing challenges we face.

Stoke-on-Trent has been hit with an unenviable reputation as a centre for Monkey Dust abuse. The human cost of this awful drug and the gangs pushing it is a problem for the city. Shockingly, it is reported that it is possible to purchase Monkey Dust for as little as £2 in Stoke-on-Trent, which is even cheaper than the drugs to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield referred. Even more worryingly, it has a highly hallucinogenic reaction, with cases of people jumping off buildings. In grotesque fashion, these miserable substances are also known as “super spice”, “herbal smoking” and “designer drugs”.

We must tackle the legacy of synthetic drugs, especially cannabinoids. The reactions to these drugs are often unknown, as has been discussed. People have died straight away from taking them. The consequences of the illicit drugs trade hit residents, who live in fear of gang violence, and add to the terrible challenges faced by those already struggling with the vulnerability of homelessness. The communities of Meir and Fenton in my constituency are now witnessing some of the highest levels of antisocial behaviour in the whole of Staffordshire. That is totally unacceptable, and my constituents should not have to put up with being terrorised by those committing offences.

Unfortunately, these dreadful drugs are often a corruption of research into alternatives to more traditional drugs such as cannabis. That research began in response to the legal ban on using cannabis for medicinal purposes. That ban on natural cannabinoids prescribed for medical purposes is rightly being lifted by the Home Secretary. I agree entirely with our police and crime commissioner, Matthew Ellis, that Monkey Dust—or plain Dust, as it is known in Stoke-on-Trent—and other synthetic cannabinoids used for what is laughably called leisure use must be reclassified as class A at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, reclassifying Dust will not in itself solve the problems of gangs—pushers will still promote gang activities and push drugs in our communities—but those who push Dust, which is a brutally dehumanising drug, should be held to greater account for their actions and face greater deterrent sentencing. That is especially important considering the drug’s exceptionally low street value, which fuels increased availability to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

That reclassification needs to be part of a wider push that includes much more action on preventive work to reduce the root causes of drug abuse and addiction. That should involve the police, local authorities, health services, schools and third-sector organisations working together to address the wider issues in our communities. In addition, there needs to be a wider conversation about how we divert young people from gang culture in the first place and protect the vulnerable, who are targeted by drugs pushers, from being criminally exploited.

We need to bring greater purpose to people’s lives and help them to take advantage of the opportunities opening up from our growing economy and record low unemployment. I am continuing to work on that with local partners in Stoke-on-Trent. I was out with Staffordshire police, housing officers from the local council and Stop Loan Sharks only last Friday in the East Fenton area. I was pleased to meet a number of local partners at Ormiston Meridian Academy in Meir recently to see what more can be done to improve things and provide facilities in the community as a distraction to antisocial behaviour, gangs and drugs.

We need to look closely at why people in employment, and even those in fulfilling employment, are attracted to drug abuse—it is not only those in the most disadvantaged communities. Sadly, class A drugs are part of designer lifestyles and have been for many years. Unfortunately, synthetic cannabinoids are just a new manifestation of an old evil. I will finish by mentioning that, should the Minister ever have time in his diary to visit Stoke-on-Trent, Commissioner Matthew Ellis and I would welcome the opportunity to show him some of the issues on the ground.

10.4 am

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate, and I rise to speak in support of the case he made. His constituency is not that far from mine and not that different from mine. Many people see Mansfield as a slightly less good Chesterfield, but suffice it to say they share many similarities. In Chesterfield, we have experienced many of the issues he will have experienced in his town centre.

One reason why the issue is felt so passionately is the scope of its impact, not only on the users, but on people right across the community. These drugs have a huge impact on those who become users. Being able to get hold of them is the only purpose in their lives at times. These people are victims and vulnerable people, but their actions impact on a huge number of other people. Many people are frightened to go into the centre of our towns because of the impact of Mamba and Spice users and the alarming state that people get themselves into on these drugs.

At times over the past couple of years, we have seen the homeless community coming together in Chesterfield. The availability of such a cheap and powerful drug is a big part of the attraction. That has a big impact on not only the town centre, but our businesses and on retailers. Retailers trying to run their businesses in tough times have contacted me, saying they have people under the spell of these drugs in contorted positions in their shop doorways. It is impossible for them to conduct their business. The issue has a big effect on shoppers and tourists.

I pay tribute to the work of Hardyal Dhindsa, our excellent police and crime commissioner for Derbyshire. Along with the force, he has put a huge amount of effort into trying to clamp down on these drugs. He
introduced Operation Chesnee, which led to 70 arrests and a spate of convictions. At least 40 people have now been charged, and convictions are ongoing. Derbyshire police have put significant resource into cracking down on Spice and Mamba, but while they are class B drugs, there is a limit to the resources they can put in and the returns they can get. There is also the impact on the ambulance service. We have seen a sixfold increase in the past year in the number of ambulance call-outs to people who are on synthetic cannabinoids.

At the all-party parliamentary group meeting that the hon. Member for Mansfield held, people were worried that a reclassification would end up criminalising users. My sense is that we have widespread agreement that we want to try to reduce the incentive for dealers. It is not about going after those who are victims or vulnerable. Because of the availability of these drugs in prison, prison is no disincentive. I am very much of the view that it is not about criminalising users; it is all about reducing the incentive for dealers. If we increase the classification and sentences rise, police tell me that they will no longer be getting people low down the supply chain. Currently, they are willing to take the rap because sentences are relatively short and they and their families will be looked after while they are in prison. Instead, those sentences will go higher up the drug chain to the people at the top, where they really belong. It is up to us as legislators to ensure that our directions for the courts achieve that aim. People may say that changing the classification will criminalise the victims, but is it up to us, when we get into the legislative process following the instruction this debate will give to the Home Secretary, to ensure that the directions to the courts are sufficiently robust for them to understand what we are talking about.

The hon. Member for Mansfield referred to antisocial behaviour, but that phrase understates the scale of the issue and its impact. “Antisocial behaviour” makes me think of children riding around on bikes in their local communities being noisy and knocking on people’s doors. The terror that is caused in our communities by behaviour that does not actually hurt people, but certainly frightens them, is much stronger than the phrase “antisocial behaviour” implies.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked about the impact on prisons. I recently visited Nottingham prison, which is one of 10 that gets specific direction from the Government on improving standards and reducing suicides. The impact that Spice and Mamba synthetic cannabinoids have on the running of the prison is incredible. People get themselves sent into prison deliberately to bring drugs in. Huge and complicated initiatives are put in place to get drugs into the prison. The prison governor is entirely realistic about the impact that that has and the inability of our Prison Service to address it. When drugs are so rife in prisons, it is absolutely impossible to do any kind of rehabilitation work. The prison governor told me about a video of one of his inmates who was on Spice. He talked to him and showed him what he was like and the guy simply said, “When I’m away on Spice I just don’t care about anything else in the world.” The drug has a substantial impact on our prisons.

The hon. Member for Mansfield was at pains to point out that reclassification is only one part of the solution. None of us has claimed that it will solve the issue. It is a social ill that afflicts us, but the chief cost of it and the comparatively low sentencing are important issues for us to tackle. Alongside that, where do we want to take the debate further? We need further resourcing for policing. If we are going to reclassify Spice ask them to and try to solve the problem, we will need to make sure there is additional resource for policing. We need a real attack—it has been inadequate so far—on homelessness. We need to recognise the link between welfare policy and many social ills. We need to ensure that drug prevention services are sufficiently robust and that we have proper support in our health system for people who want to come off drugs. We need to ensure we have targeted policing and sympathetic sentencing. We all recognise that reclassification is only one part of a much broader solution. Just because that does not solve everything does not mean that we should not try to do something. That is why I support the case made by the hon. Member for Mansfield today.

10.12 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this morning’s debate.

In recent years, Spice has been a growing problem in my constituency, particularly around the town centres, which, as we have heard this morning, is common across the country. The health and wellbeing impact on those taking such substances is a major concern, and there is a wider concern for their families and those in the community who witness the effect on individuals and the social impact on our towns and villages, with many users being in a zombie-like state. Seeing individuals in that state is unnerving and sometimes frightening for members of the public, and some have told me that they feel uneasy walking through our town centres. Again, other Members have highlighted similar experiences this morning. Clearly, the situation has to be tackled.

Residents have raised the matter with me in both Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. I have discussed its impact with both South Wales and Gwent police, who each cover a part of my constituency. It is clear that Spice, like most drugs, destroys lives and has a major and negative impact on our communities. As we know, “Spice” is the common name for what we are discussing this morning: synthetically produced substances, commonly known as synthetic cannabinoids as they were originally thought to mimic the effects of cannabis. However, recent studies on how those substances react with the brain show that they bind to a combination of receptors, making their effects much more unpredictable and dangerous.

I am concerned about how easy it appears to be for individuals to obtain such substances and about the fact that they are seen as a stepping stone to other, harder substances. Although Spice is a class B drug, users describe it as “green crack”. Merthyr Tydfil has seen an increase in acquisitive crime, particularly shoplifting, to fund Spice habits. In my constituency, both police forces are doing their best to tackle this growing problem. Over the summer, South Wales police worked proactively in and around Merthyr Tydfil town centre with a range of partner agencies, which had positive results with a marked reduction in cases. I will share some thoughts on what has been done locally.
[Gerald Jones]

A multi-agency approach to dealing with Spice has been developed, predominantly for Merthyr Tydfil town centre. The approach attempts to break the cycle of possession and offending, with education, health, housing and drug and alcohol referral agencies participating in the pilot. The strategy has been twofold: first, support for users and prevention; secondly, disruption and detection of suppliers. The work has involved partner agencies such as Drugaid, Dyfodol, housing associations and various departments in the local authority basing themselves in the centre of Merthyr Tydfil. Users found in possession were taken to the services available to them to meet their acute needs as an alternative to prosecution. It proved extremely effective in identifying a number of individuals who were experiencing differing levels of vulnerability. It was coupled with robust action taken when dealers were identified.

I want to thank and congratulate both South Wales and Gwent police and the other agencies on their work on the pilot scheme. However, clearly, as we all know, police resources are tight. With police numbers much lower than they were just a few years ago, the police's ability to continually mount such operations is limited. In addition, there are financial pressures on local authorities and other public agencies, meaning that they are less able to react and deal with the issues effectively. More therefore needs to be done to support the police and communities in my constituency and across the country to tackle the problem.

A review of the drugs policy would be a good start to finding a way forward to tackle the growing impact of drugs. I hope that today's debate will allow the Government to consider what more can be done. I ask the Minister specifically to consider what action he can take to assist the police, other agencies and the wider community to help tackle this growing problem. We need the Government to be on top of their game to help my community and need the Government to be on top of their game to help us to tackle this growing problem. We take to assist the police, other agencies and the wider community to help tackle this growing problem. We ask the Minister specifically to consider what action he can take to assist the police, other agencies and the wider community to help tackle this growing problem.

We must remember the impact that every seizure has, physically and mentally, on a child's capacity. There are people whose lives would massively benefit from whole plant cannabis. Information must be available for medical professionals to understand the medication so that they can prescribe it.

Kevin Foster: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech with great interest. As always, he is a doughty advocate for his constituents. Does he agree that there is
no contradiction in believing that Spice, as a synthetic cannabinoid for recreation use, should be made a class A drug, but that cannabis-based medicine should be allowed for specific purposes? The medicinal use of a drug is a different concept from its abuse for recreational purposes.

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. I want to make sure that we understand the side effects, but the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention brings me back to a point that I have made clear throughout the debate: reclassifying cannabis to allow recreational use is something that I cannot support. Just as we use morphine under very select circumstances and in a controlled manner, but have rightly outlawed the use of heroin, it is right that we have classified cannabis products for medicinal use in select circumstances and in a controlled manner. That is the way I believe it must be.

I do not believe that we should allow recreational use of Spice or Mamba, or that we should advocate such use of any cannabis-derived product. Nor do I believe that legislating for medicinal cannabis means logically that we should legislate to allow recreational use, or to allow for those who believe that they can self-medicate.

We need to ensure that doctors understand the limitations of the change in legislation and can prescribe to someone whose case they know well and who is not responding to other conventional drugs. We need to ensure that people understand that the change in legislation does not give them carte blanche to grow their own plants. Finally, we need to ensure that children like Sophia Gibson who had no quality of life before medicinal cannabis was available can access medication that will enhance their life, as it has clearly done for Sophia, so that they can have a birthday party without ending up in hospital, attend school without having to drop out because they are not well, and have a semblance of normality. That is what I support and will continue to support, and there is a very clear difference between the two.

10.24 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for bringing this topic back to this place. As he correctly points out, we have to raise the profile of the issue because it exists throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. Pushing it away instead of discussing it will never do anybody any good.

It is clear from hon. Members’ speeches today that we agree more than we disagree, but it is turning into groundhog day. We have had this conversation before. We agree that there is no silver bullet, that these drugs cause enormous damage, and that there is enormous strain on our local services. Where we disagree is on the effect that reclassifying these drugs will have. I repeat what I said at the start of the debate: reclassifying SCRAs as a class A drug will not grant the police any additional enforcement powers. It may make it easier for a police force to reprioritise, but it will not give it any extra powers.

Reclassification is all about longer sentences. The proposed solution would send problematic users, some with serious mental health issues, to overcrowded and understaffed prisons that are full of synthetic drugs, as has been pointed out. I do not see how that could possibly end well.

We are told that making synthetic cannabinoids class A drugs is not about trying to prosecute the end user, but about prosecuting higher up the chain. Are we going to leave the streets? We have heard how unpleasant our society finds that and how intolerant we are to people with mental health issues. If we are not going to arrest those people, why are we doing this? Is it so we can chase people further up the chain? If longer sentences for class A drugs worked, we would have no heroin or cocaine problem. We have tried that for years and it has not worked, yet we are going down the same path again.

I thank Transform, Release and Volteface for the information that they gave me in advance of the debate. Let me quote from a Volteface report:

“Dr Rob Ralphs, a senior lecturer in criminology at Manchester Metropolitan University, has researched Spice in prisons and within the homeless community in the city. He believes that making Spice Class A will make no real difference to its use, but may make the situation worse. While the market for Spice is, at present, relatively stable with four or five different strains of the drug in circulation, he said its potential reclassification could drive innovation, leading to new strains being developed to circumvent it”,

as has happened in the past. The report further quotes Dr Ralphs:

“Every time there’s been a change in the law, the next generation…has been even stronger… The big thing is why the homeless and prison populations are using it in the first place. It’s about putting money into engaging people into treatment services and trying to reduce the market. If you can reduce the market, the demand for it, then you will reduce it.”

The report continues:

“Professor Harry Sumnall, who specialises in substance use at Liverpool John Moores University’s Public Health Institute, also believes reclassification could make the problem of Spice worse. When you take a police-oriented approach to a complex health and social issue you can never address the fundamental root causes of why some cities in the UK are experiencing harms with these substances… I don’t think the emergence of Spice and the concentration of harms in some users of Spice is down to the fact that the police aren’t arresting enough dealers. I don’t accept the fact that the police can’t arrest people or are unlikely or unwilling to prioritise the pursuit of dealers because it’s a Class B. There’s nothing to stop police prioritising dealers or users of Spice.”

He said the harms associated with heroin and crack cocaine ‘haven’t been resolved by the fact that they’re Class A drugs’ and that focusing on targeting dealers with harsher penalties would not lead to users being safer or healthier.”

The point about safety is important. When we try to chase these things up the chain, as it has been said that we are planning to do, drug dealers protect their marketplace with incredible violence. If they feel threatened or their users are put under more pressure, that violence will escalate.

Criminologists argue that that makes the market more harmful because of the risk increase—an increase in the price of drugs makes the market more profitable, and the more profit involved, the more violence is used to protect it. The types of organised crime groups that might then enter the market, because the profits are higher, mean that violence and secondary harm increase.

Professor Sumnall believes calls to make Spice class A are a “symbolic response” to the issue, which “doesn’t actually translate into any meaningful public health action unless there’s a real commitment to ensure good coverage of high quality services for these individuals”.

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who use it.

Going back to this letter signed by 20 police and crime commissioners, a line states:

“We would urge that synthetic cannabinoid products are reclassified from class B to class A.”

The letter also states its concern, five times—

“an urgent public health issue...most severe public health issue...As public health and substance misuse services are not currently taking the lead in meeting this growing challenge it is failing to the police...public health, mental health and addiction services...a public health challenge”—

that this is, categorically, a public health issue and that those who should be addressing it are not doing so.

According to Professor Sumall, it is not being addressed because:

“The broader context of the failings in the criminal justice system, the fact that mental health service provision is in crisis, that local areas are experiencing around about a 30% cut in treatment budgets—those are the fundamental issues that need to be addressed rather than a totemic, symbolic response by making it a Class A’.

The blame lies here, in Parliament. The Select Committee on Science and Technology concluded in its report, “Drug classification: making a hash of it”, that the classification system was “not fit for purpose”. Harms of different drugs often bear little resemblance to their status in the ABC system, which has been distorted by political considerations and doomed attempts to send a message. That report was written in 2006, and we are none the wiser.

What can we do about that? Plenty of options are open to us, with plenty of examples around the world. Last week, I spoke to Nuno Capaz from Portugal. I asked him a straightforward question: is there a synthetic cannabis problem in Portugal? His answer was short, sharp and to the point: no. How can Portugal get this right, but we get it so wrong?

Canada’s example is to legalise and regulate real cannabis. In the Netherlands, because cannabis is legally available, the market for Spice is almost non-existent. People prefer the real thing, so demand never developed, as in Canada, Uruguay and many US states. The subtext to that is what Prime Minister Trudeau said last week about legalising cannabis—they are not doing it because it is good for people’s health, but because we know it is bad for our children’s health. That is a mindset that we have to adopt.

In conclusion, to improve life opportunities for people who use SCRAs, it is imperative that we properly fund schemes around employment, education and housing. People who use SCRAs should be diverted away from the criminal justice system. The diversion scheme in Durham, called Checkpoint, diverts people after arrest on the condition that they undertake a four-month programme to address their offending behaviour. As long as they comply, they will not get a criminal record. Initial findings from the pilot found that those who were diverted to Checkpoint had lower reoffending rates than those who were subject to out-of-court disposals such as cautions. Participants in Checkpoint also reported improved outcomes with substance misuse, alcohol misuse, accommodation, relationships, finances and mental health. Is that not what we are trying to achieve? We cannot ostracise a subsection of our citizens, driving them into more damage by pushing them into the criminal justice system, when we all agree that we are trying to provide better social services—a wraparound service—and the only way in which that will ever happen is if we buy into that concept and it is properly funded by this Government.

10.34 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this debate.

Cannabis substitutes, or synthetic cannabinoids, have developed at a staggering rate over recent years, with more than 100 chemical variants, largely imported from the far east. The biggest concern is that many are far more potent and toxic than cannabis itself. Some variants were identified and banned under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but that just led to alternatives being developed. In response, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was introduced, completely banning the production, distribution and sale of such substances, and gave police the power to search persons, vehicles and premises and to seize and destroy any products found.

The 2016 Act provided fast and encouraging results, with high street sales almost entirely ceasing within a short space of time. Criminals selling more potent versions, however, took to the market instead, resulting in all synthetic cannabinoids banned as class B drugs and possession being a criminal offence. Those measures heavily diminished the supply of the substances, but we would be naive to think that we are anywhere near solving the problem. The production and distribution of new variants will continue to evolve illegally, meaning many vulnerable people are still at risk.

Those synthetic alternatives to cannabis are cheap, which means that use of and dependency on the drugs among the homeless and those in prison continue to grow. In addition, the drugs are also often seen as a relatively easily accessible self-medication for those suffering from depression as a result of some form of trauma. Worryingly, the potency of the synthetic substances can vary, and the effects that they might have on people vary greatly. Many become dependent quickly and, although some experience few or no side-effects, paranoia and seizures are common. Far too many deaths have been attributed to the use of cannabis substitutes.

Appallingly, there is a prevalence of videos on social media ridiculing those under the influence of those obscene substances. Filming of those desperate souls is neither funny nor respectful, but we have all seen the dreadful condition that people get into after taking those evil drugs. Clearly, the interventions and legal changes made to date have failed completely to deal with the issue of synthetic cannabinoids and the rise in the use of them. If we are seriously to clear our streets, our prisons and our communities from those vile drugs, we need to overhaul our drugs policy completely to make it fit for the 21st century.

Those inflicted with that dreadful obsession should not be subjected to ridicule. They are not amusements for us to view on social media—they are real people who need us to address their addiction, look at treatment, support them, and not just lock them up to move the problem from the streets. The Government need to give
us more guarantees that they are reviewing legislation, monitoring crime statistics and protecting our vulnerable communities from the dangers of those addictive, evil drugs.

10.38 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This is not a debate about medicinal cannabis, but with your leave, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his update on Sophia and the Gibson family. Home Office Ministers are not regularly fed a diet of good news, but I was absolutely delighted to hear that. Perhaps, through him, I might pass my good wishes to the family.

Jim Shannon: After I had finished my speech, the family contacted me to thank the Minister personally—they watched the comments we made just now.

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, and I send my best to the family, who showed enormous patience and dignity throughout a very difficult situation.

This has been a good debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, Ben Bradley, on bringing the issue back before the House with persistence and tenacity. He is entirely right to do so. He described this as a serious national problem, and I do not think he is wrong about that. Statistics can be misleading. One might be lulled into thinking that synthetic cannabinoids are not a significant national problem by the statistic that less than 0.5% of 16 to 59-year-olds in England and Wales reported using a new psychoactive substance in the past year, which is broadly the same as the year before; it might seem a small number. However, as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) pointed out, there is another number. There were 24 deaths related to synthetics in England and Wales in 2017. That is a terrible number to put alongside the evidence that has come, loud and clear, from Stoke, Chesterfield, Mansfield, Torbay and Wales, that the issue we are discussing causes real anxiety across the country. It confronts people with the terrible reality of its impact on some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities, for whom, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) pointed out, £2 buys oblivion and a dehumanised state. We do not yet have that problem in Ruislip, Northwood or Pinner, but I have seen it with my own eyes on the streets of Newcastle, and it is a shocking and unsettling sight, which we do not want in our town centres, for all the reasons that Members of Parliament have powerfully articulated here today. As Members have said, the evolution of generations of such drugs is fast-moving and a major challenge.

I would like to assure the House that we are prioritising the issue, and I will set out some evidence for that. However, I remind the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North in particular that I get the urgency of the issue, and I will close with some remarks taking us forward a bit. We are prioritising the problem—the groundbreaking Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was a substantial piece of legislation. I confirm, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, that we shall publish our review of it before the end of November. However, as I have said in previous debates, there is evidence that the Act has had a powerful effect in removing new psychoactive substances from open sale and ending the game of cat and mouse between Government and backstreet chemists. Significantly, 300 retailers across the UK have closed down and are no longer selling the substances. Suppliers have been arrested, there has been action by the National Crime Agency to remove psychoactive substances and, in 2016, there were 28 convictions in England and Wales, with seven people jailed under the new powers. That rose to 152 convictions in 2017, with 62 people immediately sent to custody. In parallel with that legislation, three separate sets of controls on the progressive generations of synthetic cannabinoids have been introduced, in 2009, 2012 and 2016.

Kevin Foster: The Minister referred to the 2016 Act. I can reassure him that there used to be two head shops in Torquay town centre, but both have closed following that legislation.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful contribution. I think that we can be clear, subject to what is in the review at the end of the month, that that groundbreaking legislation has had an effect. I can also point out targeted action by the Government, concentrated on areas where we know usage is especially high.

Jack Brereton: Is the Minister aware that potentially up to 90% of cases involving Monkey Dust are in Stoke-on-Trent?

Mr Hurd: The fact that two Stoke-on-Trent MPs are taking part in the debate tells its own story about the sense of urgency and concern in that city. That will be noticed by me and by the House.

Prisons featured in several contributions, and I know that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) visited Nottingham Prison recently and was shocked by what he saw. There is clearly a significant drug problem in prisons, exacerbated by the emergence of synthetics and psychoactive substances. I can, again, point out a stream of action being taken. A new drugs force is working with law enforcement to restrict supply, reduce demand and build recovery, and is working with 10 of the most challenging prisons; £6 million is being invested to tackle drug supply in those establishments. There is a new national partnership agreement for prison healthcare and a new £9 million joint Ministry of Justice and NHS drug recovery prison pilot at Holme House Prison. I could go on, but I see evidence of a proactive Government approach to drugs in prisons.

A number of colleagues mentioned rough sleeping, and made the relevant links with these drugs. Again, that is an unacceptable feature of too many town centres, high streets and shop entrances. I hope that there is cross-party support for the new rough sleeping strategy. The £100 million package is a step towards achieving the vision of a country where no one needs to sleep rough, by 2027. I could go into the details of that but I think that the House is aware of it.

There was, rightly, substantial comment about the need for effective treatment and prevention. I could not be more supportive of the emphasis that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield placed on that. If we have learned anything in this place from many years of
Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman has jumped ahead of my remarks. I am sure he understands the context, because he is a sensible man. In this complex situation, when dealing with something fast-moving, the Government have to take decisions based on good evidence and a good understanding of the risks, the threats, the drivers of the market, the changes in the market and the likely consequences and implications of decisions, including about classification. I am setting out a series of urgent pieces of work that will look at the drugs market in a broader sense, which is a big step in itself, and a specific commissioning of the National Crime Agency to look at the threat assessment of synthetic cannabinoids—for the first time, as I understand it—with a commitment to report back to us in spring.

I am also asking the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, whose advice we rely on for decisions on classification, to advise on refreshing its assessment. We have not done that in the last few months because the honest truth is that it has not been that long since the council last took a view in 2014. In this fast-changing environment, however, and given the representations of real concern made by Members of Parliament and by police and crime commissioners, it is the right moment to ask the council to refresh that assessment of synthetic cannabinoids’ harms.

Hon. Members, and not least my hon. Friend for Mansfield, have been clear that reclassification is not a silver bullet—to use that cliché—and that we need to get several other things right. We should also be clear that reclassification would arguably not significantly increase the police’s powers to deal with the possession, supply and production of these substances. Instead, it would primarily increase the penalties for possession from a maximum of five years in prison to seven years, and for supply and production from a maximum of 14 years in prison to life. The House will have its own view on whether that change would have a material impact as a deterrent.

The Government rely on advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, whose last assessment was in 2014. Even though that does not seem that long ago, based on representations made to me, it is the right time to ask it to refresh its assessment. I give that undertaking to hon. Members. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend for his tireless passion in pursuing this cause, and other hon. Members for making it clear to the Government that there is no room for complacency.

I am grateful to you, Mr Howarth, and Ben Bradley: I am grateful to you, Mr Howarth, and other hon. Members for being present. I thank everyone for their contribution. This has been a good opportunity to continue to raise the issue of synthetic cannabinoids and to keep it on the agenda as the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and the Department considers it. I thank the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for supporting my application for the debate, which was much appreciated.
I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his long-term support and his contributions to various debates on the subject. I also thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). As much as we disagree on some of the implications of this, we agree that it is a public health issue—I hope I made that clear in what I said—and that the system currently gets it wrong.

From what the Minister has said, it is clear that the Government are looking at their drugs policy more broadly and how they might take it forward. There is definitely a discussion to be had. This campaign has a long way to go, but I am confident that we will continue to make progress. I welcome the Minister’s remarks, and I thank him for laying out what the Government are going to do, with reviews by the Department and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the work that is happening in prisons and the potential work in the health service. All that is welcome, and I take from it that the Government are taking the issue seriously.

I welcome with open arms the letter I received from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs last week about its review of reclassification and what that should look like, but I press the Minister on the speed of that review. The council suggests that it will take nine months to deliver its decision, which seems like a long time.

I welcome the Minister’s comments about the Government dealing with the issue and taking it seriously. I will continue to prioritise it and raise it during the reviews. I will keep having this conversation with the Minister, and I thank him for his patience on that. I will also keep prioritising the safety of my constituents.

I hope that in the coming months, and through the reviews, we will come to a conclusion about positive action that the Government can take to support local services and to benefit our communities by helping users and by keeping people in our town centres safe—that is the public safety aspect of the issue. In future, there needs to be proactive action and change from the Government to make that happen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids.

Plymouth Challenge for Schools

10.57 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Plymouth challenge for schools initiative.

It is good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Howarth. Funding good schools is the best investment we can make in our children’s future. Teachers, teaching assistants and support staff do a superb job, but Ministers cannot keep asking them to do more and more with less and less. With rising costs, a crisis in recruitment and retention, and the mounting costs of the growing crisis in our young people’s mental health, the urgent need for decent school funding is as stark as any warning can be. I will speak about Plymouth, our funding challenge and how, by working with the Minister, we can create an initiative of which he, I and teachers in Plymouth can be truly proud. The Plymouth Challenge is an initiative worthy of the Minister’s focus, his Department’s energy and the investment of public funds.

Hon. Members will know that I spoke in the debate about school funding last week. I plan to touch on some of the same themes, but the crux of the debate is the specific funding ask for the Minister to back the Plymouth challenge. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to meet me and a delegation of cross-party councillors, teachers and headteachers from Plymouth next month, but I will not waste another opportunity to pitch this fantastic initiative, thank the teachers and teaching staff who do such a superb job in Plymouth, and call for the urgent funding for children in Plymouth and the far south-west to get our fair share.

The Plymouth challenge is an example of collaborative action by several educational specialists that are working together to improve educational outcomes across Plymouth. The Plymouth challenge has cross-party support from Plymouth City Council’s Labour and Conservative leaderships and is backed by headteachers, and the regional schools commissioner’s office and the Plymouth Teaching School Alliance. Its focus is on promoting aspiration and leadership in secondary schools and helping to support schools to improve outcomes, especially at the end of key stage 4.

The Plymouth challenge seeks to replicate the success of other challenges across the country, most notably in London, but elsewhere in places such as Manchester and Hull. In each case, standards and teaching quality were driven up by the considerable and focused investment of time, energy and money in our teachers and schools. Focused deep learning enables teachers to improve on their weaknesses, build on their strengths, grow in confidence, share best practice and know that their passion and commitment to the children they teach is matched by a similar commitment to their development by their employers, the Government and their city.

Plymouth is in the bottom 10 of all local authorities for secondary school performance. We have one type of every school thought of by Governments since 1945, so it is not the lack of diversity or competition that is hitting standards. Results at the end of key stage 4 are below the national average, and the percentage of students achieving a strong pass in English and maths is below four in 10. On average, by the end of key stage 4,
students have made less progress than similar students nationally. A shockingly high number of schools are judged inadequate—four out of 18, and five out of 18 before the studio school was closed in the summer, as the Minister knows.

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and disadvantaged pupils are increasingly likely to be off-rolled or excluded not because of the work of staff and students, but because the support is not there for those pupils to function and succeed in a mainstream environment. Elective home education has nearly tripled in four years, and in some schools fixed-term exclusions have risen by more than 200%.

The contrast is clear when we compare Plymouth with London. In the capital, nine out of 10 children go to a good or outstanding school, and the national average is about eight in 10, but for children in Plymouth it is five out of 10. One in two—50%—of our kids do not go to a good or outstanding school as rated by Ofsted, which needs to change.

The Plymouth challenge has the potential to be a huge success, but at the moment it is a voluntary initiative that hard-pressed teachers must do in addition to a full curriculum—marking homework, preparing lesson plans, filling in paperwork and being surrogate mental health workers, social workers, mentors, leaders and role models. It cannot function simply on a voluntary basis. Plymouth City Council has said that only £900,000 to £1.3 million is required to implement the first phase of the scheme. That would be money well spent, and good value, too. In Plymouth, we have the will and the passion, but we simply lack the funding and time to make it work. Our teachers and teaching assistants need deep learning. That cannot be just one hour swapped out of a classroom for a quick update on skills; it must be deep, intensive learning so they benefit from the latest in teaching quality initiatives. The children who otherwise would have been taught by them must have a high-quality replacement to ensure that their education does not suffer because of their teacher’s participation in the scheme.

Training matters, because training and investment in a pupil’s development improves retention and reignites the passion for learning. I have spoken to countless teachers who have either left the profession or are considering leaving because of the pressure, the stress and the seemingly never-ending squeeze on spending and real-terms pay cuts. The Plymouth challenge could help to address that.

School funding has been a growing concern for a number of years, as schools in Plymouth and the far south west as a whole continue to be denied our fair share of resources. The hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) is dealing with an urgent constituency matter, in which he has my full support, but has asked that his support for this call be added to my remarks. If other Conservative Members had been here today, I am certain their concerns about education funding in Devon and Cornwall would also be highlighted. Although it is a particularly dodgy socialist standing in front of the Minister today, many Members not only in my party, but in his, too, share this concern and back this solution.

Two weeks ago, I met headteachers during my one of my regular pastries and politics roundtables in Plymouth, and the seemingly never-ending pressures on finances, cropped up time and again. As the proud son of a teacher, I know how hard teachers work. Each of them is full of love and passion for their subject, but too often today their spark is being put out. Too many are left frustrated and demoralised by the double-edged sword of a lack of support and an increase in pressure to do more with less.

Schools across my constituency have suffered consistent underfunding since 2010, and a vicious cycle of cuts—particularly cuts that do not sit in the education budget but affect things that local authority budgets previously took care of—has worsened existing conditions. As class sizes have increased, the number of teachers and teaching assistants has decreased, and the vulnerable and poorest students in our communities are increasingly in the most underfunded schools.

Plymouth has one of the lowest education spends per head in the United Kingdom—£415 less per child than London and £300 less per child than the national average. That shortfall has had a damaging impact on students in Plymouth, who continue to fall behind the national average for academic attainment. Funding and attainment are linked.

When the national funding formula is fully implemented in about 2020-21, Coventry will receive £4,806 per pupil, compared with Plymouth’s £4,532. That difference of £274 per pupil equates to a loss of funding of £9.4 million for Plymouth. Coventry is a city similar in size, population and demographics to Plymouth, but it has very different education funding. I have no fight with Coventry—except when it comes to football—but I use that example to illustrate that not all children are being valued in the same way across the country.

The Minister will know from my remarks during the previous debate on this subject that I have particular concerns, one of which is the maximum gains cap. I would like the Minister to consider reviewing and removing the 3% maximum gains cap, which is part of the national funding formula. One of the key principles of the national funding formula was that pupils with similar characteristics should attract similar levels of funding, wherever they are in the country. That is a good idea, but the maximum gains cap prevents schools that have been underfunded for many years from receiving their fair share of their current entitlement because their gains are throttled. For example, under the funding formula, Plymouth is due to gain £10.6 million, but the maximum gains cap means that, in practice, schools in Plymouth will receive less than half that amount—£4.7 million in 2018-19 and £8.7 million in 2019-20. The gains cap means that they will get less than they should be getting under the funding formula.

Even with the additional funding formula, Plymouth continues to receive considerably less than the national average. I would be grateful if the Minister could review whether the gains cap is appropriate, and whether it could be flexed or removed to give places such as Plymouth, which have received lower funding deals historically, a chance to catch up more quickly. It seems to me that the schools that have lost out the most will be disadvantaged in their progress towards a fairer position because of that historical underinvestment. It does not seem fair, equitable or justifiable that the Government put in place this policy. To achieve the objectives that the Minister rightly wants and to have a fairer funding formula for all pupils, we need to address the maximum gains cap, which throttles that benefit.
I am certain that many of the teachers watching this debate will be alarmed that Department for Education rules have limited the fairer funding formula. I would be grateful if the Minister said in the previous debate that, although the figures for the period between now and the end of the fairer funding formula are limited, that important retrospective gap must also be addressed.

Many of the teachers who got in touch with me ahead of this debate raised concerns about mental health funding and the increased pressure that that puts on their role in the classroom. The Government’s warm words on mental health are to be welcomed, and I back many of them, but there have been cuts to mental health provision for young people in primaries, especially in the Plymouth excellence cluster—a body that pooled mental health funding for our schools—which lost its funding earlier this year.

The three-year mental health funding deal for secondary schools in Plymouth is due to expire this year, and no replacement funding has been identified. That cannot be right, and I would be grateful if the Minister gave urgent consideration to providing support, especially for young people who are receiving mental health support. If money cannot be found for them from existing school budgets to replace that funding, they will lose it. Our teachers are brilliant, but they cannot also be professional mental health workers. Many of them have raised that concern with me.

Rather than hear it from me, it is more fitting if the Minister hears this from the teachers themselves. When I secure a debate in this place, I often let people know about it on my Facebook and Twitter pages, and even on Instagram. Last week, I asked people to send in their stories and experiences. I am sure many of them will be familiar to the Minister. Flex wrote to me to say:

“I’m a Supply teacher and a product of the ‘Troops to Teachers’ scheme. Of the 50 teacher trainees that began the course and 2 years into teaching there are 12 of us left nationally. I have worked in many schools in the Plymouth area and many are seriously underfunded. TAs are invaluable supporting SEN or 1-1 children to simply keep a class running. I have worked in schools that have run out of books, paper or have a shortage of IT or Sports equipment. As a Supply, I regularly fund and bring my own resources into certain schools because I know some items will not be available such as pens.”

Plymouth City Council and many of Plymouth’s teachers wrote to me ahead of this debate to share the key asks. Unlike other challenge programmes around the country such as those in Manchester, London and Hull, there has been no targeted DFE funding, although it has provided official support on staff time. I would be grateful if the Minister committed to investigate what funding pots are available to support the Plymouth challenge and initiatives like it around the UK.

I would also be grateful if the DFE sent a clear message that all Plymouth children should expect to be able to attend a good or outstanding school, and set out a timeframe. At the moment, only half our children attend schools in that bracket. I would be grateful if the Minister set out a framework for working with Plymouth City Council and local schools and academies to support the Plymouth Challenge steering group to achieve that objective.

As part of our funding request, we seek resources to appoint a full-time challenge co-ordinator and for an outstanding headteacher or experienced professional from outside Plymouth to be seconded for at least a year to provide the professional challenge, curiosity and inquiry that is vital to making an initiative such as the Plymouth challenge work. I would be grateful if the Minister and his officials supported us in that endeavour.

The Minister knows that Plymouth has every type of school thought of by every Government since 1945. Diversity of provision is the daily reality in Plymouth, so lack of diversity is not the problem. The problem is the fragmentation to which that leads. I would be grateful if the DFE signalled a commitment to driving collective accountabilities instead of supporting that fragmented system. I recognise that there are challenges with that, but although there seems to be a belief that Plymouth has achieved the perfect level of competition that Ministers seek, it has encountered problems, perhaps earlier than other cities around the country that are progressing towards that.

Finally, given the growing focus on multi-academy trusts, I would be grateful if the Minister told us where there is intentional design of MAT development in the far south-west and Plymouth, and how successful MATs and school leaders can be secured to support the city. No school should lose out from the MAT process.

Let me read testimonies from two teachers who wrote to me ahead of the debate. Tom wrote:

“This is only my fourth year as a teacher and I am close to just about avoiding becoming one of those five year drop-out statistics. On a good day, it can be a hugely inspiring and rewarding job but the immense pressures involved mean that a remarkable number of passionate teachers have left. I have been involved in one of the key elements of the Plymouth Challenge: the idea that local schools need to more efficiently collaborate with regards to curriculum planning, moderation, CPD etc. It’s a project with an admirable goal. However, rather than funding coming from the existing budgets of already struggling schools, the government urgently needs to provide an additional grant for the Plymouth Challenge as it did previously for other major cities.”

Nina wrote:

“I’ve been a teacher and leader for over 13 years and I love my job. I have also had a real terms pay cut again this year and seen amazing teachers leave the profession. I have been involved in Plymouth Challenge since early 2018.”

She stated that the main issue is that there is no funding, “yet the expectations being placed on teachers to deliver results are significant. Schools, teaching staff, support staff and school leaders are keenly aware and can’t work any harder—but maybe we could work smarter.”

Plymouth Challenge was sold to schools as a model by which subject specific hubs could be set up to organise training and develop and share expertise. But there’s no money and teachers who volunteered to help run these hubs were told we should think about what we could charge schools to attend and that we could have start up loans”.

Nina goes on:

“There is so much goodwill—so much expertise—but the lack of funding means there is a creeping scepticism and frustration. The Plymouth Challenge has immense potential but we can’t ‘maximise current funding streams’ to make it work – those funding streams are already maxed out.”

There is huge enthusiasm for the Plymouth challenge among teachers and teaching staff in the city. There is a window of opportunity in the next few months for us to
securing it by getting to grips with funding it properly and providing wraparound support for teachers. The initiative can work, and it must work if we are to achieve the improvements in grades that we all want.

If austerity really is over, the Government have the opportunity by supporting this campaign to make up for historical underfunding in Plymouth and to improve the lives of children in my city in real terms. I say to the Minister: support teachmeets and online training courses focused on Plymouth priorities, support our young people's mental health services, support our aspirations to empower disadvantaged students, and support co-operative models across Plymouth’s schools to look at how we can ensure that every child, regardless of their background, their parents' jobs or their postcode, has a chance to fulfil their potential.

I genuinely look forward to working with the Minister. There is potential for us to work in a cross-party way to ensure that all our kids in Plymouth succeed and achieve their best.

11.14 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced it. We share a vision for Plymouth of ensuring that every child in the city, regardless of their background or where they live, receives a world-class education that enables them to reach their full potential. That vision is shared by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). They continually raise education issues with me in the Chamber and the voting Lobbies.

Let me say up front that I support the Plymouth Challenge, which is a school-led initiative supported by Plymouth City Council and the regional schools commissioner, who is appointed by the Secretary of State. The challenge was set up to tackle historical underperformance in a number of secondary schools in the city. It seeks to harness the many strands of school improvement initiatives currently being undertaken in the city and to add to those initiatives capacity, resources and experience from other schools in the area and from outside the area. It was developed by the headteacher strategy group, which is made up of secondary headteachers.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport knows, the Plymouth Challenge is organised around three strands: strengthening leadership, raising standards and raising aspirations. On the second of those, systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. It is hugely important to secure the basics to equip young people with the life skills to decode, read and understand the world around them. The proportion of pupils in Plymouth who meet the required standard in the phonics check rose from 58% in 2012 to 82% in 2018, in line with the national average.

At key stage 2, Plymouth schools and pupils have risen to the challenge of the more rigorous primary school national curriculum that we introduced in 2014. In 2018, 62% of primary school students in Plymouth reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. That represents an eight percentage point improvement on the 54% of pupils in Plymouth who achieved the same result in 2016. Despite that gain, Plymouth’s figure is still two percentage points below the national average. It is therefore important that the primary sector continues to deliver improvements and builds on that upward trajectory in reading, writing and maths to get it above the national average.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, outcomes at secondary level are mixed. In 2018, 40.4% of students in Plymouth entered the English baccalaurate, which is a core group of academic GCSEs—English, maths, at least two sciences, a language and a humanity. That figure outstrips the national average of 35.1% and is 1.5 percentage points higher than the figure for Plymouth in 2014.

That means more young people in the city are studying and achieving through a core academic curriculum, which I firmly believe provides them with the knowledge and skills for a variety of careers beyond school life. However, we need the proportion of pupils studying the EBacc combination to rise significantly in every secondary school in the city.

On other key stage 4 measures, Plymouth lags behind the rest of the country. Its 2018 Progress 8 score is minus 0.32, which is below the national average. One way of improving standards, particularly at secondary level, is harnessing expertise both within and outside a city. A strong Exeter-based multi-academy trust is already having an impact by driving up expectations. Standards at two Plymouth secondary schools are benefitting from that expertise, and Reach Feltham, the top-performing London academy, provides that partnership with leadership support and challenge. That model is proving very effective.

We need to look outwards and build on great examples across the country, be that Michaela Community School’s marriage of high standards, exemplary behaviour and manageable teacher workload, which the hon. Gentleman referred to, Tom Bennett’s approach to improving behaviour in schools, or the myriad trusts finding success in the face of challenging circumstances.

There is also a benefit to be realised from more formal structural partnerships in the city. We welcome the increased engagement in Plymouth of high-quality multi-academy trusts outside the immediate region. Reach South Academy Trust is an example of a MAT that has done precisely that, bringing external expertise and experience into the city by creating a cross-phase hub and, as part of that, sponsoring UTC Plymouth.

The hon. Gentleman raised the national funding formula, specifically the maximum gains cap. Nationally, approximately 75% of schools, including those that were historically underfunded, will be on the national funding formula allocation by 2019-20. I reassure him that schools are already benefiting from that. The formula has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school that schools are already benefiting from that. The formula, specifically the maximum gains cap. Nationally, approximately 75% of schools, including those that were historically underfunded, will be on the national funding formula allocation by 2019-20. I reassure him that schools are already benefiting from that. The formula has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school.

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The hon. Gentleman raised the national funding formula, specifically the maximum gains cap. Nationally, approximately 75% of schools, including those that were historically underfunded, will be on the national funding formula allocation by 2019-20. I reassure him that schools are already benefiting from that. The formula has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school in 2018-19, with increases of up to 3% for underfunded schools and more for the very lowest funded.

Changes to the formula have delivered significant gains in Plymouth, where schools have attracted an extra 3.3% per pupil on average this year. By 2019-20, that will be 5.9% more per pupil compared with 2017-18. That is equivalent to an extra £251 for every pupil, or a total increase of £10.2 million when factoring in rising
pupil numbers. Furthermore, 15 Plymouth schools benefit from the formula’s minimum per-pupil funding level. These schools will not have their gains capped, so they will attract their full allocation by 2019-20.

The Department has also prioritised additional support for Plymouth through the strategic school improvement fund, with £681,000 approved to support 42 Plymouth schools, including funding projects focused on the teaching of phonics and maths. The high-quality training delivered through the secondary system leadership project has been welcomed. Although the project is in its infancy, I am confident that it will deliver increased capacity and capability in effective school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

Two Plymouth secondary schools have further benefited from £299,000 in emergency school improvement funding to drive longer-term whole-school support. The impact of that funding has been significant. For example, a “Ready to Learn” behaviour approach at All Saints Academy has fostered a culture in which rules matter and is proving to be an enabler of excellent teaching.

Furthermore, we have given strong trusts in Plymouth the opportunity to access additional funding to improve schools and increase social mobility through the MAT development and improvement fund. Four Plymouth trusts have been awarded grants and will access a minimum £298,000 of funding in this financial year. In total, that is more than £1 million in additional funding that the Government are injecting into the Plymouth education system. Funding for Plymouth schools is £149.6 million this year, rising to £153.3 million next year.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the importance of the Plymouth Challenge initiative. I share his vision of a high standard of education for all pupils and a system that enables all—regardless of background—to reach their potential. I have spoken about the collaborative stewardship role that we have taken in working towards transforming education in Plymouth, the impact of the funding streams that we have harnessed and committed to the city’s schools and the importance of working with stakeholders and learning from excellence outside the city. I have also spoken of the formal and informal ways in which we are strengthening leadership, raising aspirations and improving standards for the benefit of Plymouth pupils now and in the future.

I am keen to work with the hon. Gentleman and other Plymouth Members, and headteachers from his constituency, to explore how we can support the system, allowing schools to be at the forefront of improvement while continuing to challenge standards. I very much welcome his involvement in seeking to raise standards in Plymouth schools and very much want to be part of that process. Working with him, headteachers and other Plymouth MPs, I am sure that we can achieve a huge amount through the Plymouth Challenge to raise standards in all Plymouth schools.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.
[Ruth Smeeth]

food and its staff came to volunteer. During that one session more than 100 people turned up, which shows the level of demand that we have.

It is not just the heartbreaking stories that should us drive us to act. The impact on the long-term attainment of my wonderful children should be front and centre for the Education Minister. Not only does youth malnutrition impact on long-term health outcomes; it also has a direct impact on young people’s attainment, not least the fact that if young people stop using cutlery or writing implements for weeks at a time, they lose dexterity and muscle memory, which affects them on their return to school. Some of them, especially younger children, will not know how to hold a pen. Research suggests that the children who do not receive appropriate nutrition during the school holidays could return in September more than four weeks behind academically than they were in July, making it much harder for them and their families and for the teachers who have to help them catch up.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is a very good debate. I do not want to stray from the main issue. In my constituency, there are teachers in schools who step up to the plate in the holidays. They put on special subjects, which they are not paid for, in order to arrange for food, meals and exercise for children who are not taken on holiday.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We are, at the moment, in the hands of those people who volunteer their time, and who give children access to their buildings and schools. If they did not volunteer those facilities, school provision could cost families up to £15 or £20 a day. My constituents cannot afford that, and I am sure that my hon. Friend’s cannot either.

Against the backdrop that I have described, in the summer of 2017, my local heroines, and the odd hero, set out to pull together people and organisations from across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove to launch the first comprehensive pilot programme to tackle holiday hunger and deal with school holiday provision in north Staffordshire. At this point, I should make it clear that we all hate the phrase “holiday hunger”. It is misery-inducing and heartbreaking, but it can also be counterproductive, as no parents want to admit, or even accept, that they are struggling to feed their children, so they opt out of programmes. In 2017, therefore, we launched Fit and Fed, our pilot for the extended summer of 2017, my local heroines, and the odd hero, set out to pull together hard data to work out what delivery systems are most effective, and to begin to develop best practice that can guide similar projects nationwide.

Mr Sheerman: As soon as my hon. Friend mentioned the word “data” I was reminded of the encouraging statement to the House yesterday by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about public health. The one thing he seemed to be talking about was the link between poverty and poor health. Does not what my hon. Friend is talking about exemplify the link between poverty and poor diet, which the Government seem reluctant to make?

Ruth Smeeth: In fact, the Government of Canada have done research to demonstrate the cost of poor nutrition to the public purse over a lifetime, in lack of attainment and job prospects. Also, it ends up costing the NHS a lot; if someone starts from a low base and does not get the right nutrition, it costs the public purse even more in the end. To me, the individual families are the most important part of the issue, but there is also a question of how much it ends up costing the general public if we do not get things right. My hon. Friend is right, and I hope that the Department of Health and Social Care will view what I am talking about as part of the prevention agenda within public health.

As for data collection, six different methods of tackling child food poverty and holiday provision were tested in my constituency. Some of the methods involved the direct provision of food alongside sport and craft activities in both primary and secondary school settings. Elsewhere, the direct provision of food and activities were maintained, but the programme was taken out of an educational setting. Instead, Wesley Hall, a modern church in the heart of Sneyd Green, was used. The YMCA facilitated community meals. The whole family could turn up at lunchtime and enjoy a hot meal as part of the scheme. That was an extension of its wonderful monthly community lunch programme—once a month, on a Friday; I highly recommend it. There was even a meals-on-wheels-style scheme, where food was delivered directly and discreetly...
to the doors of families who could not access any of the schemes easily. Each of the approaches was found to have pros and cons, and it is clear that a broad mix of delivery approaches is necessary to reach as many of the most vulnerable families as possible.

The pilots were to my knowledge the most structured and rigorous attempts to address the challenge of holiday hunger conducted in Staffordshire, certainly—and I suggest, as I am very proud of us, nationally. However, they were not the only activities taking place in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. Across the constituency, local people who had heard what we were trying to achieve got involved and organised their own projects to make sure that the kids in their community were not left behind. My favourite, and the most chaotic, was in Chell Heath in my constituency. Thirteen mums from the local children’s centre came together expecting to look after 25 to 30 children a day. They ended up with more than 100, which was not quite what they were prepared for. When you walked in, it was complete and utter chaos—organised chaos—and a delight to visit. It shows the demand out there for proper holiday provision.

All in all, last summer, more than 10,000 meals were dished up across the constituency. I am so proud of the way local people pulled together to deliver such an enormous project. Together, they touched the lives of hundreds of children who without the projects would have faced a summer of hunger and isolation.

Kerry McCarthy: Bristol East (Lab): My hon. Friend has been doing brilliant work. We had a pilot scheme in Bristol, and what I found particularly interesting about it, and about the national results, was that children really wanted the fresh fruit. They regarded it as something of a luxury. Also, taking the leftover food home at the end of the day was very important. It shows the level of food poverty in which those children exist.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more. One thing that we must look at is how people cook—there could be cooking classes in some of the activity programmes—and also ensuring that there is enough food at the end of the day for the whole family to have a meal that night, if necessary; it is not just about the children participating in the schemes as a secondary consequence of making sure they get wonderful holiday provision.

Mr Sheerman: Many Members have just come back from the church service to commemorate 100 years since the cessation of the first world war. Does my hon. Friend recall, from learning history, that it was only when we started recruiting soldiers for the first world war that the extent of malnutrition in this country’s children as they reached 18 was realised? Nutrition was below the standard of any other country in the Commonwealth. Has my hon. Friend, with her community groups, looked at how good the data is on the effect of poor diet in the holidays on children’s overall health? Are GPs and clinical commissioning groups monitoring that?

Ruth Smeeth: That is a fascinating point. There have been more than 100 years of free school meals. One of the things that I find extraordinary about free school meal provision is that we did not think about school holidays. That is because there used to be community provision. Historically, schools were built with the kitchen at the front, so that when they were closed the kitchens were still open. As for the long-term health benefits, one of the great partnerships we had was with the public health team at Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This year and next year, we are working with Keele University, which will help us to assess the long-term impact.

The very best part of the fact that the schemes happened last year is the point that they did not end there. The pilot was not a one-off. Local efforts to tackle holiday provision have grown and grown. This summer, we had 12 holiday clubs operating in my constituency, with many more across the whole of Stoke-on-Trent, under the flag—for those who know Stoke-on-Trent—of Ay Up Duck. I cannot really do the proper accent. The organisation was set up to continue the work of the previous year, to move it on from the stigma that might have been associated with holiday hunger schemes. More than 5,926 meals were dished up by the Ay Up Duck scheme, and 460 parents accessed the food too, which was a significant development on last year. The scheme continued last week with a full programme of activities in half term, and will continue at Christmas, next half term and Easter before we get to next summer. Although Ay Up Duck did not receive direct funding as part of the national pilot, it got support from our local opportunity area. I welcome all support, as the funding provided by the Department for such projects has made a positive impact in supporting civil society to tackle child food poverty in local communities, but I fear it is insufficient, given the scale of the problem.

I have some questions for the Minister—this is his bit. What plans does he have to roll out the funding to every local authority? Our experience suggests that to ensure that schemes are co-ordinated and safe, a central point of contact and support is vital. Can the Minister inform us of his conversations with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about establishing a point of contact with each council? One of the challenges for holiday provision schemes is ensuring that they prioritise the right people for support. What conversations has he had to encourage family support workers to engage in such programmes outside term time? Many schools are struggling to find the additional funding to encourage them to work during the holidays.

We all have a responsibility to ensure that we are sharing best practice and not reinventing the wheel. Can the Minister update the Chamber on what he is doing to disseminate best practice? Specifically, what is he doing to ensure that appropriate support is in place to ensure that safeguarding requirements are met where all the schemes are being run?

The people who have made these projects happen have demonstrated our potential to effect real change in communities. They provided a lifeline to families in desperate financial situations and to others who just needed a little help, and they delivered a summer of fun, food and learning to children who may otherwise have gone without. Their example deserves to be celebrated and I am delighted that we are doing that here, but as we celebrate the work that is taking place in the Potteries and across the country, we must remain focused on the scale of the challenge. Although programmes to tackle holiday hunger are increasing, so are the number of families struggling to get by.
On 15 August, The Times Educational Supplement reported a 150% increase in the number of children receiving support from FareShare, the UK’s largest redistribution charity, compared with last year. The poverty that stands between our children and their full potential is still with us. The gaping hole in provision during the school holidays too often remains unfilled. For far too many families, the simple dream of a summer holiday of fun and comfort remains just that. These projects have made a real difference to people’s lives. It is my privilege to share their stories, and my duty to say that there is much more to be done.

3.32 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smethurst) on securing this important debate. My constituency is particularly blighted by food poverty. It has four food banks and there are a further six in the rest of the city. My office operates a makeshift food bank, where my staff regularly—in fact, daily—give out food parcels to constituents who have come about another issue such as universal credit, employment and support allowance or working tax credits. Once we start peeling away that onion, we find other issues under the skin, so we regularly give out food parcels.

In summer 2017, I was at a family fun day in my constituency to mark the start of the summer holidays. I received a call from a food bank, which told me that 36 families with children had turned up the day before, so the shelves were completely bare—there was nothing left. It was concerned that that would be a huge problem. I talked to some people, including media people who were at the event, and we put out an appeal, which resulted in a tremendous amount of food being donated to that food bank and others that were experiencing similar.

Reflecting on that, it became evident that the sudden demand for families to visit the food bank had to be due to something, which was obviously the fact that the schools were closed and the children who normally had free school meals could not get them. Families who live hand-to-mouth throughout the year, many of whom work but are on low incomes, become dependent on free school meals to provide their children with at least one hot meal a day.

I have spoken to countless teachers who have said that working families are struggling and that they can tell if the children are hungry. In my experience, I know the children are hungry. If someone has three school-aged children receiving free school meals, they will have to find 90 extra meals over the summer holidays. If the children have free breakfasts too, they will have to find another 90 meals. That is a lot of money and a lot of food to find for parents who are struggling.

For the last two years, my staff and I—they have been absolutely wonderful—have taken it upon ourselves to run our own summer lunch club. In the first year, I begged, stole and borrowed from anyone who cared to give. From bread and cheese to milk, yoghurt and bottles of water, we threw it together. We targeted children who were participating in free activities, such as free swimming or free play schemes, or who were in community centres that were providing free children’s activities. We would start at 7 o’clock in the morning, work through until about 9 o’clock, and then go and open the office. On the first day, I remember thinking that if we could feed 500 children in 10 days, we would have achieved something. By 10 o’clock that morning, after we had made the first delivery, I was getting phone calls from people saying, “Is that the sandwich lady?” I did not disillusion them, but said, “Yes, it is. How many do you want?”—I think I am still known as the sandwich lady.

In that first year, we served nearly 6,500 meals. They were primarily sandwiches, although with the resources we got from asking the food bank for food, we were able to provide a limited hot meal service at three centres. This summer, however, we provided 10,000 meals. We were able to convince the staff at Admiral and at Arvato, which is the shared services centre for the Department for Transport, to help.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend will know that, in a previous incarnation, I was a Welsh politician at local council level—my ward abutted your constituency. Such programmes had tremendous support from the massive number of staff at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The staff were great charity organisers and gave marvellously. Not everyone has a good experience with the DVLA, but the people who worked there were some of the best people helping local charities, and I wonder if that continues.

Carolyn Harris: The DVLA is in my constituency—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members, particularly hon. Members of long standing, to use parliamentary language. If they refer to “you” or “your”, it is me. It is a relaxed debate, but this is not the first time.

Carolyn Harris: The DVLA is in my constituency and I have yet to target its generosity on this matter, but my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) should have no fear—it is on my hit list.

Mr Sheerman: That is unparsley language!

Carolyn Harris: I apologise, Mr Stringer.

We have had help from organisations such as Bidfood, which is a huge wholesaler; Boss Brewing, which provided us with a kitchen; the Coastal Housing Group, which provided resources and the delivery service; Dignity Funerals, which is connected to my children’s funeral fund campaign and has donated a huge amount of money; and Morrisons and Warburtons.

I recently met the Federation of Wholesale Distributors, which represents wholesalers up and down the country. It explained the good work that its members do to help to prevent holiday hunger and to provide children with the food they need during the school holidays. One of its members, Brakes, has been part of the “Meals & More” holiday hunger scheme for many years, and recently pledged £100,000 a year for the next five years to aid the initiative. That is a wonderful example of how businesses in communities are helping those communities.

When you see a child grabbing a bag containing a cheese sandwich, a yoghurt, a packet of crisps and a bottle of water with enthusiasm and excitement because
they are hungry, you cannot fail to be moved. It does not just pull at your heartstrings, but makes you think about how we take things for granted. Many kids do not get sufficient nutrition during the summer holiday. Even more importantly, many do not get basic food to fill their stomachs.

Now to the political bit. I was going to talk about the fact that, this Christmas, I am providing more than 100 food hampers to be delivered to those in need in Swansea. That will be done with the help of many people in my constituency who are giving me the money to work with Morrisons to provide a full Christmas dinner, including a joint and everything else that we take for granted, such as chocolate biscuits and mince pies. For people on low incomes, those things are luxuries to which they can only ever aspire.

Last year, the South Wales Evening Post launched a scheme called “Everyone Deserves a Christmas”, and collected clothing, food donations and everything else we take for granted. That tells us that there is a community spirit. Day in, day out, in times of austerity, people work hard to ensure that people in our communities, and especially children, are looked after. Surely there is more the Government can do to help them. Surely we can find ways to support people. It should not be done on a charitable basis, although nobody who gives to the work we do, and nobody who receives it, considers it to be charity, because it has become a necessity. I urge the Government to do everything they can to ensure children do not go hungry at any time of the year, and especially when they do not have access to free school meals.

3.41 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on the absolutely amazing work she is doing to ensure her constituents are fed, although it is incredibly sad and frustrating that we have to do that in our society.

Some fantastic work is being done in my constituency, and I would like to draw hon. Members’ attention to a couple of examples. Organisations in my constituency and right across Glasgow have grasped holiday hunger incredibly well. It is important that the help for families is not just a handout. We want to get the biggest take-up of holiday food provision, so it must be free from stigma. It must be community-focused and provided in an inclusive, welcoming environment.

Dalmarnock Primary School in my constituency took the lead with its “Food, Families, Future” scheme over the summer holidays. More than 80% of the children who attend Dalmarnock Primary are in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation category 1—the lowest category—and 30% have English as an additional language. Many of their parents have no recourse to public funds due to Home Office decisions, so sadly they are also in need of support and food over the summer. The Home Office sometimes does not allow them to work—I am not quite sure where it imagines they will be fed.

The summer project is fantastically well thought out and has had input from partner organisations from all over Glasgow, including Possibilities for Each and Every Kid—PEEK—which is brilliant at doing play work with children and giving them a proper summer to remember. The project did not just provide food for kids, but used the school’s resources to tackle several key poverty-related indicators. It was more of a summer camp than a food bank. In addition to holiday hunger, it addressed social isolation for parents, who often cannot take their children out to different places, and finding being stuck in the house on their own all summer isolating and lonely. Being on a tight budget over the summer holidays means that there is limited scope for play and entertainment. Parents face a long period in which they cannot take up work because they have got caring responsibilities. Working is difficult because they have to pay for childcare.

The Dalmarnock Primary School scheme was about more than just free meals. It gave families the chance to support one another, and for children to take part in sports and other activities in a safe, familiar space—they got to go to their own primary school over the summer. Such projects offer a crucial link for families and communities, and build strong support networks so families are more likely to access help that they need in the future and parents are less likely to feel isolated. They build up peer-group friendships, which they might not otherwise have been able to do.

Glasgow City Council has since allocated £2 million for Glasgow children’s summer food programme, hoping that similar projects can be replicated throughout the city. The fund makes awards available to organisations that can feed children over the holiday period, in ways that support their wellbeing and a healthier relationship with food. The Scottish Government have made Scotland the only UK country to have defined statutory targets for tackling child poverty, through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. They have allocated £1 million towards the tackling child poverty development plan, which sets out practical assistance for measures to improve food security during the school holidays.

It is important to acknowledge that child poverty cannot be solved by one strategy, one Department or one Government. It is a complex issue and we have to consider the wider context in which any policy is operating.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Lady is right to say that this is a cross-departmental issue. The other day, the Environmental Audit Committee quizzed four Ministers from four Departments about the sustainable development goal to end hunger, and asked them where responsibility sits within the Government structure for ending hunger. I was extremely alarmed when they all looked blank. They all looked at each other, and nobody knew the answer. It is important that we have a departmental lead—a Minister with responsibly for fulfilling that sustainable development goal.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. If no Minister is responsible for it, it is easy to pass the buck, ignore it and say, “It’s not my job.” It has to be somebody’s job, but it is nobody’s job. That is an important point.

A point that is often missed in debates about child poverty, hunger and food banks is the cost of infant formula. A report that the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities will launch soon details that the cost of infant formula has increased, but the wages in people’s pockets and healthy start vouchers have not kept pace, so families have to make the impossible choice between feeding themselves or feeding their infants.

The Chancellor said that austerity is ending soon—perhaps, maybe—but it will be a very long time before families in my constituency feel any change. There is no
denying that, over the past 10 years, austerity has been a huge underlying driver of child poverty in Scotland and across the UK. The Scottish Government are doing what they can to mitigate the effects of the cuts, but the actions that can be taken are limited. Their analysis shows that, this year, 130,000 more children in Scotland could be pushed into poverty as a result of the UK Government’s welfare cuts. That is approximately the population of Dundee. If the number of children in poverty can fill a whole city, something has gone drastically wrong.

Universal credit has started to be rolled out in my constituency, and will hit the Shettleston jobcentre on 5 December. Somebody applying for universal credit on the very first day of the roll-out at the Shettleston jobcentre will not get any money until 9 January. The Government often say that people can get advances, but they push people below what the Government say they need to live on for a year as they clear that debt. That is absolutely unacceptable. They rob themselves in advance to get an advance on universal credit.

I have always found the idea of independence for Scotland attractive, but I do not want it for its own ends. I want it so we can have a Government that we elect, not a Government that chooses austerity over the future of our children.

3.48 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for securing this important debate.

In Scotland, there are approximately 170 non-school days a year when children cannot access free school meals, putting a lot of pressure on low-paid families that rely on them. The absence of a free school meal for children can cost families on low incomes between £30 and £40 per week. The Trussell Trust has warned that food bank use spikes not just in the Christmas period but during the summer. As we have heard, in 2017, 593 organisations running holiday clubs across the UK provided more than 190,000 meals to more than 22,000 school-age children.

As we have a bit of time, I have some stats from the Glasgow South West constituency, where activities like those happening in other hon. Members’ constituencies is a lack of comprehension of what goes on for constituents such as his and mine and those of other hon. Members who have spoken? Is it not the fact that, at the top of our country, there are people from the soft parts of Surrey and from Maidenhead who just do not understand the pressures and the situations that people on low incomes face in the age of austerity?

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman think there is a lack of comprehension of what goes on for constituents such as his and mine and those of other hon. Members?

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman was referred to earlier as a veteran of Parliament. When I arrived here in 2015, the first thing to hit me—it hit me right between the eyes—was the class differential between some of us on the Opposition Benches and those on the Government Benches. I agree that there seems to be a lack of understanding of what happens in the daily lives of far too many of our constituents as they struggle to navigate their way through life and the social security system. I recommend that he looks at the work of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of which I am a member. That lack of understanding is evident to us.

Southside Housing Association staff told me that they saw the visible signs of poverty and hunger, and believed that its programme helped people. The housing association also had a back-to-school uniform bank. It alarms me that not only do we have food banks but toy banks, baby banks and school uniform banks are starting to emerge. Some 2,000 items were donated by Glasgow South West constituents in that bank. That is just some of the work the Southside Housing Association managed to do in Cardonald in Glasgow South West. It did similar work in Pollokshields in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

As others said, we need to look at the punitive social security reform and austerity measures that lead people into poverty. Tackling poverty and inequality must be Parliament’s key priority. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the UK Government need to follow where the Scottish Government have led on helping children to access food during school holidays. Early intervention will reduce the need for people to rely on holiday hunger schemes and help to reduce the stigma of using such schemes.

The Scottish Government’s tackling child poverty delivery plan helps parents to work more flexibly and increases their incomes by helping them with the cost of uniforms, childcare and the like. The fair food fund aims to ensure that everyone can feed themselves and their families. That fund supports community projects such as Crookston Community Group in my constituency, which offers dignified and sustainable responses to food poverty.

Regularly skipping meals has a massive impact on children’s behaviour, concentration and development. The children’s charity Cash for Kids was granted £150,000 to help community organisations support children during the school holidays with activities and access to meals. That funding is the first of the £1 million that will be allocated over the next two years to tackle food insecurity outside term time, and it is just part of the £1.5 million
fair food fund, which supports projects to help people move away from emergency food provision and access healthy, nutritious food through community-based activities and support. A number of Scottish local authorities are planning to provide free meals 365 days a year to children from low-income families—a proposal that was welcomed by the Child Poverty Action Group.

However, we need significant social security reform from the Government to ensure that families and children do not go hungry during school holidays. The pressures of child hunger are exacerbated by the benefit freeze and social security reform—decisions on social security have a direct impact on hunger. The overall benefit cap needs to be raised and the benefit freeze ended so that households are not forced into destitution. With the introduction of universal credit, deduction rates for advances, arrears and overpayments, and all other third-party deductions, need to be reduced.

The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), drafted a Bill, which I supported, that would place a duty on party deductions, need to be reduced.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) drafted a Bill, which I supported, that would place a duty on the value of central government contributions to social security services in the constituencies of the hon. Members for Glasgow Central and for Glasgow South West—by the Scottish Government. Last year, it cut more than £5 million from education budgets. We begin to see that it is not just central Government who are to blame for this issue—there are other Governments up and down our land who have not walked the walk or talked the talk. I am sorry to have to raise that, but it is the case, and there is sometimes very little scrutiny in this place of what goes on north of the border.

Alison Thewliss: Does the hon. Gentleman not appreciate that the Scottish Government have a fixed budget, a lot of which comes from this place? Austerity comes from Westminster and is only passed on up the road to the Scottish Government and then to Glasgow City Council.

Mike Kane: I did not realise that we had any Liberal Democrats in the room. That is the old cry of, “This is the problem and they are to blame for it,” without the Scottish National party’s taking any responsibility, despite its control over lots of levers of power, which is important.

As has been pointed out, more than 3 million children were at risk of hunger during the school holidays this summer because they were not getting their term-time free school meals. That is shameful. At the heart of the debate is the impact of the Government’s eight years of unrelenting and indiscriminate austerity. Universal credit is failing in many of our constituencies, and the urgent question on it the other day was really interesting. There should be preferential options for the poor when we make public policy in our country, and universal credit should have a preferential option for those who are in the poverty of having mental health problems. Its impact on those people causes much stress and tips them over the edge.

More than 4 million children are growing up in poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North made an absolutely fantastic point on inequality, which I see in my constituency and other Members see in theirs. In some schools, 40% of children are not school-ready—they do not know about reciprocity or play or how to hold cutlery or pens, which my hon. Friend mentioned—but in others in my constituency, that figure is up to 80%, and growing, because of the austerity of the last few years.

More than 1 million people now go to food banks, and the situation is predicted to get worse. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the number of children living in poverty is likely to soar to a record 5.2 million over the next five years. Government Members should hang their heads in shame that families in that situation cannot afford to feed their children in the school holidays.

It is interesting how, in our city, Mr Stringer, schools compete over which of our two great teams runs their holiday club. Schools generally choose the team that compete over which of our two great teams runs their holiday club. Schools generally choose the team that
Port Vale and Stoke City came together to deliver something. My hon. Friend may even get Manchester United and Manchester City to do the same.

Mike Kane: We will certainly look at that. I think that Mr Stringer and I would say that we are excellently served by the community schemes of both great football clubs in our city, as my hon. Friend is in hers.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead and my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields set up Feeding Britain, a charity focused on demonstrating how hunger and its underlying causes can be addressed. The United Nations estimates that more than 8 million people in the UK are food-insecure. At the moment, the Government have no way of measuring that and understanding the scale of the problem. The Food Insecurity Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, is awaiting its Second Reading. It has a simple ask of the Government, calling on them to provide for official statistics on food insecurity. That is supported by more than 20 national organisations and, so far, more than 150 MPs from across the House. The APPG on hunger, and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have also advocated the measurement of hunger. Will the Minister commit today to supporting the Bill on Second Reading?

The Bill makes a cost-neutral proposal to bring the living costs and food Survey into the 21st century and to enable the Government to fully understand the challenge of food insecurity, which puts more than 3 million children at risk of going hungry in the school holidays. A Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead that sought to enact the recommendations of the APPG’s report on countering hunger among children during school holidays sadly did not progress on Second Reading earlier this year.

However, the Minister stated that the Government would provide funding for research and pilots on holiday provision over the summer. Feeding Britain and the APPG provided information to the Department to help inform that research and pilots. Have we had the promised announcement on the outcomes of that research and the national roll-out?

Ruth Smeeth: About four hours ago.

Mike Kane: We had it about four hours in advance of the debate. That is not good enough by any stretch of the imagination, Minister. I am sorry to sound like a schoolteacher, but that is how it is.

When all is said and done, we can launch as many pilots as we want, but the fact is that we live in a society where parents cannot feed their children in the school holidays. Will the Minister commit to ending the sticking-plaster approach and talking to his Cabinet colleagues about a genuine end to austerity and the introduction of a real living wage of £10 an hour, to ensure that every family has enough to make ends meet and that no child will have to go hungry?

4.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this important debate. I know that she is passionate about this matter and was instrumental in establishing the Fit and Fed pilot scheme in Stoke-on-Trent in 2017. I will embarrass myself by attempting the accent, but hearing about Ay Up Duck was truly inspiring.

I also thank the many colleagues who have spoken. I think the local paper of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is already writing the headline, “The Sandwich Lady has DVLA on her hit list”. I have to say that for her, her team and her constituents to have delivered 10,000 meals this summer is truly admirable. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) contributed, and I am grateful for her courtesy in sending me a note to explain why she was slightly delayed in joining the debate. There were also many interventions from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is no longer here. I did not agree with all of them, but some were worth noting, including those on his work in local government.

I reiterate the Government’s commitment to delivering a country that really does work for everyone. For most children, the school holidays should mean fun experiences and a chance to make memories with friends and family. We want to make sure that those opportunities are available to all children, regardless of their background.

Let me first set out what the Government have done on our key priority of tackling poverty and disadvantage. In 2017, we published the “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families” strategy, which focused on measures to tackle the root causes of poverty and to improve children’s welfare. For most people, work represents the best route out of poverty. Unemployment has not been lower since 1975, and the proportion of workless households is at its lowest since records began.

However, we recognise that there is more to do. One of the Government’s guiding principles is to promote social mobility and to ensure equality of opportunity for every child. My Department plays a leading role in ensuring that a package of support for disadvantaged children is in place to help them reach their full potential.

We recognise the benefits of providing healthy food to disadvantaged children. Through our free school meals policy, more than 1.1 million disadvantaged children currently benefit from a free meal at school. In September 2014, we extended that to include disadvantaged further education students—that has not been raised in the debate, but it was clearly an area that we needed to extend policy to—and to give free school meals to all children in reception and years 1 and 2 in England’s state-funded schools.

To get the best out of their time at school, children need a healthy breakfast. We have invested up to £26 million from the soft drinks industry levy to support the national school breakfast programme, delivered by Family Action and Magic Breakfast. Through that programme, we will set up or improve more than 1,700 breakfast clubs in the most disadvantaged areas of our country, focusing on our 12 opportunity areas. Last week, I visited St Mary’s Primary School in Battersea, 50% of whose children are on pupil premium, and saw for myself the advantage of a nutritious breakfast and activities, whether we are talking about maths, English or just running around the yard. One bonus, one upside, that the headteacher told me about was that attendance had increased.
I shall now talk about the subject of this debate—the holiday activities and food programme of work that my Department has committed to. I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North that “holiday hunger” is the wrong title, which is why I prefer to talk about holiday activities and food. Earlier this year, in response to the private Member’s Bill mentioned by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) and promoted by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), I announced work to investigate how to support the most disadvantaged children to access free healthy food and enriching activities during the school holidays. The purpose of that is to allow us to gather more evidence about the scale of the issue, the most effective ways of tackling it, and the costs and burdens associated with doing so. As a result, we will be able to make an evidence-based decision about whether and how we should intervene in the long term.

As part of our 2018 programme of work, my officials have reviewed the available research evidence and engaged with national and local delivery partners. We have learned that the evidence base for the schemes, although still in its infancy, shows that they can have a positive impact on children and their families. We have learned that the most effective forms of provision seem to be those that deliver consistent and easily accessible activities and involve children and parents in the preparation of healthy food. Throughout that programme of work, we have engaged with those on the ground delivering this type of provision, those building the evidence base and those supporting providers. I am referring to people such as Carol Shanahan—she is absolutely brilliant and truly an inspiration and, alongside the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, set up the Stoke-on-Trent pilot in 2017—Lindsay Graham and Professor Greta Defeyter.

Our stakeholders have told us that providers want to work better with other stakeholders to improve targeting and referrals, and link up with other people who could support them, such as food providers. They told us that they want greater co-ordination across the sector to help to raise awareness of provision and to ensure that provision exists where it is most needed, so it is targeted. Providers have told us that they have learned that the most varied and nutritious meals and snacks. Others had arrangements with providers such as Brakes’ Meals & More, which delivered healthy and nutritious food to them, saving them time in the kitchen. However, other clubs were not so lucky. My officials visited clubs with no on-site catering facilities and clubs that relied on food donations through schemes such as FareShare. That meant that it was sometimes harder for them to provide a varied menu of healthy and nutritious meals.

Through the introduction of minimum standards, guidance, training and support, I think you will agree, Mr Stringer, that this is enormously powerful stuff.

In March, I announced a £2 million fund to support organisations to deliver healthy food and activities to children in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country during the 2018 summer holidays. We awarded funding to seven organisations, which told us that, with that money, they were able to support about 280 clubs—including three in Stoke-on-Trent—reaching about 18,000 children. The information that we have gathered from the projects—from data on attendance reported by the projects, from visits to a small sample of clubs and from conversations with the organisations that we have funded—has helped us enormously in thinking about how we as a Government can add value in our 2019 programme.

We have today published figures evaluating the performance of the clubs. I am aware that there was some confusion about the number of people helped by the programme. Today’s figures relate to the number of children who have been helped by the scheme. They show that thousands of children—approximately 18,000—who have benefited from the programme. In July, a figure of 30,000 was used. However, for one supplier, the figure estimated the number of times that children would be helped by the programme, so it was slightly misleading. I wanted to set the record straight on that.

We will be able to say more about what we have learned from the 2018 projects later this autumn, when we announce our plans for the 2019 programme, but for me, the key messages from the projects that we funded this summer have been as follows. First, I want to pay tribute to and thank all the staff and volunteers involved in the clubs for what they achieved with limited time, resources and people. Second, there was huge variation in the types of provision on offer. For example, some clubs were open all day, every day over the holidays, but others opened for an hour or two over lunch a couple of days a week; my officials saw clubs in a range of venues that offered a range of activities. Thirdly, we want to preserve that variety and ensure that clubs can operate in a way that responds to the needs of those attending. However, it was clear that there are areas where the sector needs support and where a more strategic and co-ordinated approach could add real value and achieve real efficiencies, and that is what we want to focus on during the 2019 programme.

As an example of where greater support and co-ordination could help, I would like to focus for a while on the food aspect of provision. Many clubs benefited from having the facilities, knowledge, experience and volunteers to be able to prepare and cook delicious, healthy and nutritious food and snacks. Others had arrangements with providers such as Brakes’ Meals & More, which delivered healthy and nutritious food to them, saving them time in the kitchen. However, other clubs were not so lucky. My officials visited clubs with no on-site catering facilities and clubs that relied on food donations through schemes such as FareShare. That meant that it was sometimes harder for them to provide a varied menu of healthy and nutritious meals.

That meant that it was sometimes harder for them to provide a varied menu of healthy and nutritious meals across the summer holidays. Healthy meals are so important if we are to tackle issues such as childhood obesity, which has been mentioned and which disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead has just joined us in the Chamber. It is a privilege to have you here, sir. You were namechecked earlier in my remarks.

We intend to do much more next year to support clubs to deliver the healthy and nutritious food that is the key to supporting children’s health and learning, as well as to tackling obesity. Throughout 2018 we have listened and learned and, as a result, for our 2019 programme we are exploring options for establishing a grant fund. I think that this was one of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. We are looking to establish a grant fund to set up local co-ordinators of free holiday provision for disadvantaged children in a number of local authority areas across the country. Our plans are not yet confirmed, but we envisage that those co-ordinators will fund, support and promote free holiday provision in their area, aiming to ensure that there is enough to meet demand—one of the issues raised by the hon. Lady—to improve its quality, to increase awareness, promotion and targeting and to implement a more efficient and joined-up approach locally.

The hon. Lady also mentioned safeguarding, which I know many groups find challenging. We recognise the importance of safeguarding and are looking at how local co-ordinators can support providers on that, including through the use of minimum standards. We will also
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look at how we can disseminate best practice after the 2019 programme. As I said, the plans are not yet confirmed and we will look to publish further information about the 2019 programme and invite organisations to bid to become involved later this autumn.

Before concluding, I want to pick up on the point made by the hon. Members for Glasgow Central, for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Wythenshawe and Sale East on universal credit. A strong economy is the best route to raising living standards and giving everyone the opportunity to make the most of their talents and hard work, no matter who they are or where they live. Since 2010, we have supported nearly 3.4 million more people into work. That is more than 1,000 people a day, every day, producing a record rate of employment and, as I mentioned earlier, the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. The introduction of universal credit will mean an extra 200,000 people moving into work, because work will always pay. It will add £8 billion per year to the economy when fully rolled out. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East mentioned disabled people. Around 1 million disabled households receive an average of around £110 more per month under universal credit.

In conclusion, I again thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for securing this debate, highlighting this important issue and speaking with pride about the team in her constituency who have delivered above and beyond. We know that the school holidays can be particular pressure points for some families. I think this afternoon’s debate has spanned our approach to tackling disadvantage more generally, as well as some of the specifics about work we have undertaken on support for disadvantaged children during the school holidays.

I am fully committed to taking forward work to explore how we can support disadvantaged children and their families during the school holidays, to complement the Government’s package of support in schools for disadvantaged children. That will ensure that all children have access to healthy food and are engaged and invigorated after the school holidays, so that they are ready for the new term.

I hope that I have left enough time for the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North to wrap up.

4.20 pm

Ruth Smeeth: I thank everyone for their participation today. I am in awe, as ever, of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is obviously “the sandwich lady from Swansea East”; I usually call her the queen, but now I will have to rename her.

We have seen from the varied contributions quite how important this issue is and I thank all my colleagues for their contributions, with a special “honourable mention” to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), without whom we would not have got as far as we have.

I am delighted that the Government are now looking at a more strategic approach for delivery. The one caveat, however, which I raise with the Minister, is that of those families that have an income of £15,000 a year, 30% of them go without a meal in the school holidays to ensure that their children can have one. This is a working poor issue as much as it is an issue for those people who live on benefits, and I hope that will be reflected in future schemes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered holiday hunger schemes.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.
Post Offices (North Yorkshire)

[SIR DAVID AMESS in the Chair]

4.45 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered Post Office provision in North Yorkshire.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. Let me begin by saying up front that I strongly support post offices and want to see them thrive. Everything that I will say about how we can make our post office network more sustainable for the future is to be taken in that positive way.

I sought this debate because of the closure of the Cold Bath Road post office in Harrogate and the proposed relocation of the Crown post office in Harrogate from its location on Cambridge Road to WHSmith. However, it is not just Harrogate in North Yorkshire that is affected. We are seeing the same relocation to WHSmith Cold Bath Road post office in Harrogate and the proposed post office network more sustainable for the future is to be taken in that positive way.

This debate has attracted attention from other parts of the UK. We are being followed by sub-postmasters up and down the country. I have had emails from the west country, Wales and much closer to home. They confirm that the underlying points I will raise are of wider concern. That was also clear from the meeting last week of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, which discussed the relocation issue.

Post offices are an important part of our national infrastructure. They provide access points not only for post office services, but for banking and Government services. We are seeing huge growth in the parcels business through internet shopping, and the Post Office has developed very good products. We are seeing increasing use of post offices for their banking services. That is particularly important as the number of high street bank branches has fallen. That point has been highlighted to me by smaller, often independent traders. We are also seeing increasing use of the gov.uk Verify scheme. That service matters, as it helps to tackle the growing issue of identity fraud. The passport and driving services have been highlighted by local residents in Harrogate and Knaresborough as being valuable. The services matter, so post offices matter. The question with the relocations then is about how we ensure that the people of Harrogate can continue to access the services.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech. In York, we too face the challenge of a post office closure. The post office has been there since 1884. It is on the main thoroughfare for tourists and residents coming into the city, and it is due to relocate to an area where footfall is falling massively—it is 15% down in the past two years. Does he agree that we need to look at the business case and the impact on the local community and local businesses when assessments are made of the future viability of a post office?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I entirely agree that as these relocations are considered, the implications for business and the community must be considered in the round. I am aware of the location of the post office—York is a very near neighbour to Harrogate and Knaresborough—and its importance, and I strongly agree with the point that she has made.

Post offices matter and the services matter. The access point is absolutely critical, and I am not happy with the proposals. I have enormous reservations about the relocation of a Crown post office to a WHSmith. In Harrogate’s case, it is moving from Cambridge Road to the Victoria Centre. My key reservations are about access and security. On access, both locations are in our town centre, but parking in the immediate proximity is easier at the existing location. Disabled parking in particular is good at Cambridge Road, whereas for the Victoria Centre it is across the A61, a very busy road.

I did not know how the proposed location in WHSmith would work until I received an email from WH Smith at lunchtime today with significantly more information, followed by a six-page letter from the Post Office a couple of hours ago. Having been in meetings today, I have not had the chance to go through it in detail yet, but I will do so directly after the debate. Clearly it will answer some questions, but I think it will raise even more.

We now know that the proposal is to locate the post office on the first floor of WHSmith. There are lifts, escalators and stairs in the store, and the shopping centre entrance will be flat, but first-floor retailing inevitably has a lower footfall than ground-floor retailing. I spent many years in retail before I came to Parliament, so I know that first-floor and ground-floor locations are very different. I am sure that the email that I received at lunchtime was trying to help, but in reality it has made my fears worse. However, at least the Post Office has confirmed that all the staff in the very good Crown post office team will be TUPE-ed across and have some security, which is reassuring news for everybody.

On products and services, the Post Office has confirmed that all existing services will transfer with the location, but that Home Office passport services will not transfer. That is a loss. It feels as if the Post Office is in retreat, both physically and in its offer, when the opposite should be happening.

I must draw the Minister’s attention to the nature of the Post Office consultation. When it first got in touch with me, its email said that “any proposed changes will be subject to a public consultation”. However, at the all-party group meeting last week, it announced that the franchising decision has already been made and that it is a private commercial matter. I am not sure that those two comments are in any way consistent. We need a proper, wide consultation.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene again. I, too, was at the APPG meeting. The Post Office made it very clear that its consultation was more about information exchange, rather than being a proper consultation. It said that it had already looked at access issues, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that it will not take note of those crucial issues?

Andrew Jones: That was indeed a very disappointing part of the Post Office’s response at what was otherwise a very good APPG meeting. I want the consultation to be much more wide-ranging. I want it to consider the...
views of the people of Harrogate; I am sure the hon. Lady wants the same for the people of York, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) wants the same for his constituents. The issue affects locations right across north Yorkshire.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Post office services are always critical, but particularly now. Banks in villages and towns such as Kirkbymoorside and Filey in my constituency are closing, handing over responsibility for banking services to post offices and walking away, yet there is no long-term guarantee of how long those post offices will exist. Does he agree that it is critical that we continue to invest in our post offices so that people have physical access to banking services and to the many other services that post offices provide?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point; I totally agree. From a business perspective, I have no doubt that in some parts of our country, post offices are the last opportunity for local banking. They play a critical role, and the need for their preservation has to be a consideration not just for the Post Office but for the Government when they consider how the financial services structure of our country can thrive in the future.

I learned from the correspondence that I received this afternoon that the consultation will start tomorrow; I do wonder whether I would have received the information with quite the same urgency if the debate had not been scheduled for today. I am sure that there will be a big response to the consultation. My campaign to collect local opinions on the proposal has already had hundreds of responses. A summary of the views submitted is that, overwhelmingly, people value their post office and want a secure future for it without loss of service. Consultations on other branches across the country that have moved have been very shallow, so I hope this consultation will be better, instead of being just a paper exercise. I will make sure that all the responses that I have received will be fed into the considerations.

I am not blind to commercial pressures on the high street. I recognise that the internet is changing business models and that the Post Office, like all companies, must evolve—that is a given. The Post Office is to be commended for returning to profit last year for the first time in 16 years. I can see why it may wish to leave the Cambridge Road location, because it is a very large building—the team showed me round some years ago—and much of it is unused. Leaving space empty is bad business, but has the Post Office considered a new smaller stand-alone location more tailored to its future needs, in which it could continue to offer good access and a complete transfer of services without any erosion? I fully recognise that unnecessary overheads make business unsustainable, but a search could easily reveal a location that would make the post office fit for the future.

I ask the Minister to raise in her discussions with Post Office management the process for reletting sub-post offices and the speed at which they do it?

We need a new sub-postmaster at Cold Bath Road post office, which has closed. It is a popular branch: when it was earmarked for closure by the Labour Government in 2008-9, we held a protest march, which was quite unusual for Harrogate, that attracted significant attention. We marched from the Cold Bath Road post office to the Crown post office, and we changed the Government’s mind. The post office stayed open and became a valuable part of our local business network and our thriving community. We want it to open again, but it needs a sub-postmaster to run it. The process needs to be speedy, so I ask the Minister to consider the process and speed of reletting sub-post offices. That issue has been highlighted by hon. Members who are not present for our debate because they do not represent North Yorkshire, but who recognise the same issue in their constituency.

At a time at which the Government are taking action to support high streets and make them viable, through significant Budget measures such as the future high streets fund and the changes to business rates, it feels as if the Post Office is taking steps in the opposite direction. People and businesses need post office services, from parcels to banking, and from passports to savings, but a business does not thrive by making it harder for its customers to find and use it. It should do the opposite. Instead of thinking about a retreat to fewer services, we should think about growth towards more.

Those are the points that I will raise with the Post Office, because I want to see all post offices thrive in Harrogate and beyond. I ask the Minister to raise them in her discussions with the Post Office, because the issue affects many parts of our United Kingdom. Post offices are a valuable part of local communities right across the UK.

4.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir David.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) on securing this debate on post office services in North Yorkshire. He has been an energetic and passionate advocate of post office services in his constituency. Post offices play such a vital role at the heart of our local communities, so it is only right that we have opportunities to debate the Post Office and the services it provides locally. The Government recognise and value the economic and social importance of post offices, in particular to communities in North Yorkshire. That is why our manifesto made a commitment to safeguard the post office network and to support the provision of rural services.

I point out that I am the Minister with responsibility for post offices, so it is right for me not only to champion the Post Office but to listen to hon. Members’ concerns. I also offer challenge directly to Post Office Ltd in our role as its Government owner. I will first look at some facts.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government provided nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network of at least 11,500 post offices. Ninety per cent.
of the UK population must be within one mile and 99% within three miles of their nearest branch. Government investment has enabled the modernisation of more than 7,000 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours per week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on a Sunday.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: I will make some progress first.

Post office banking services enable 99% of personal and 95% of business banking in any one of 11,500 branches, supporting consumers, businesses and local economies in the face of accelerated bank closures. Financial performance has improved, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough outlined, from a loss of £120 million to a trading profit of £35 million in financial year 2017-18, thereby reducing Government funding from £415 million in 2013-14 to £50 million by 2020-21.

I encourage the House to look objectively at those facts. They clearly show that the network is at the most stable it has been in a generation. All that has been achieved notwithstanding increasingly challenging trading conditions in the Post Office’s core markets and in the wider retail sector. The Post Office offers a huge range of products and services to the UK public, while ensuring that those services remain at the heart of towns and villages throughout the country. In doing so, it offers great value for money for the taxpayer.

Finally, we recognise that changing consumer behaviour presents a significant challenge for small retailers, including the many postmasters up and down the country. In the Budget last week, therefore, we announced a one-third reduction in small retailers’ business rates bills for two years from April 2019. A retailer could save up to about £8,000 per property per year, which will benefit a range of retailers, including post offices.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister look specifically at the case of York’s Crown post office? It is in a prime location in our city for both residents and tourists. Will she look at it in the light of it being a profitable post office, so that the whole business case is properly reviewed?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I said before the debate, I am happy to look at York specifically in the future, asking any questions that the hon. Lady might have of Post Office Ltd directly.

I appreciate that the proposed changes to the delivery of post office services can cause much concern to the communities affected. Post office branches, however, are not closing but are being franchised, whether on site or to be relocated to high streets. Franchises typically provide the same range of post office services as those offered at Crown branches.

Moving the directly managed Crown offices to retail partners has helped to reduce the losses in part of the network from £46 million as recently as four years ago to break-even today. I must stress that franchising is not about closing branches, but about moving a branch to a lower-cost model while continuing to offer high-quality service, more convenient hours and better locations. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough has questioned location, and we can look at that, but Citizens Advice found that franchised branches deliver the same or better standards of service to the customer.

Regarding the recent WHSmith announcement, the communities of Harrogate and Knaresborough, as well as other communities in North Yorkshire, are not losing their post offices, which will be relocated to WHSmith branches, making services more accessible to customers.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister makes a good point on the Government’s support for the post office network. The concern is where, because of the closure of banks, post offices end up being the only physical premises at which someone can bank. If the Government were to withdraw their support, those towns will have no banking service. Can we do more either to stop banks closing the last branch in a town, or to give longer-term support to post offices to ensure that that does not happen?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the role that post offices play in the banking sector. As he knows, the Post Office and the banks have an agreement about the enjoyment of post office facilities for use in offering services traditionally provided by high street banks. The Post Office is in negotiation with the banks to renew that agreement. As the Minister responsible, I have been clear about what I believe: the Post Office needs to benefit; customers need to benefit from a banking framework; and the banks need to accept their responsibility for the role now being played by post offices.

For example, those WHSmith changes will add four and a half hours to the opening time of the Harrogate branch in the constituency of my hon. Friend. Rest assured, however, that the existing branches will continue to serve the community until the changes are finalised by the Post Office.

My hon. Friend is right that the Coal Bath Road post office closed on 1 October. Post Office Ltd is committed to delivering a new partner or provider for that branch. There have been commercial issues with regard to provider and post office. Sometimes, unfortunately, contractual matters get in the way, but I absolutely accept that it is something we want to deliver.

With regard to the process, my hon. Friend is right that Post Office Ltd will carry out the consultation from tomorrow. Again, I request that anyone who can puts in a response to the Post Office, because it has to look at the consultation to ensure that it answers the questions and deals with the concerns expressed by the community. I will, however, raise the questions of process directly with the Post Office. He is right to challenge me as the Minister responsible to pass that challenge on to the Post Office.

The Post Office runs local consultations to engage local communities and to help shape its plans. That is in line with its code of practice on changes to the network.
Citizens Advice reported that the process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed or reassurances provided in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community. I know that the Post Office will continue to engage with local communities and to consider all options to ensure provision of sustainable post office services before its plans are finalised.

My hon. Friend wants the Post Office to consult on the concept of franchising before it consults on any new locations. However, these decisions must be commercial ones for the business to take within the parameters set by Government to ensure we protect our valued network. Post offices operate in a competitive environment and we should allow the business to assess how best to respond to the challenges it faces in order to meet our shared ambition of securing post offices for the future.

On the reduction of services that my hon. Friend thinks is taking place, he is correct that the biometric enrolment for UK Visas and Immigration, which is currently available at 99 branches, is not easily transferrable. He is absolutely right that that agreement is directly with the Home office, and it will obviously cause him concern.

I understand my hon. Friend’s concerns about first floor access for the disabled to the WH Smith and that post office, and about car parking. We need hon. Members to challenge the Post Office about those directly to ensure that it provides accessible centres within our communities.

Finally, the Government are completely committed to ensuring that we strengthen and support our post office network throughout the UK. To date we have done that effectively and kept branches open, of which I and the Government should be proud. We have seen a reduction, but we should celebrate what we have done.

We want our post offices to remain at the heart of our communities. We want them to provide services that are more accessible for our communities. They have always been at the heart of our communities and I hope they remain so. As the Minister responsible, I assure my hon. Friend that I will do my best to ensure that the Government—the owner of Post Office Ltd—duly represent our constituents regarding any issue he raises about the post office network. I am happy to have further conversations with my hon. Friend over the next few weeks as the consultation progresses. I will happily meet him and any other hon. Member any time to discuss the consultation and any changes.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. It has been an opportunity to challenge the new franchise system but also to celebrate what the post office system is doing and the value that post offices bring to our communities. Without them, we would be in a very different place. It is absolutely right that the Government continue to back the Post Office. I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to mention the individuals who work within the post office network, who are integral to ensuring that those services are delivered day in, day out throughout the country.

Question put and agreed to.
I have a couple of questions for the Minister. When will the Department carry out a full cost-benefit analysis that compares badger vaccination with badger culling? When will Sir Charles Godfray’s review of the Government’s TB policy be published? Will it consider the use of vaccination as an alternative to shooting?

Some horrific video footage has been obtained from the badger cull area in Cumbria. A caged badger was shot and took almost a minute to die, writhing in agony. The shooter then flagrantly disregarded the biosecurity guidelines, took the badger out of the cage and failed to bag it up—little wonder that the Government’s policy has not been particularly successful in reducing the spread of TB. That is just one small example—I will come on to others in a moment.

The contractors are paid about £30 to £50 for each badger they kill, but of course the shooters have access to thousands of trapped, caged badgers, and a live badger can fetch about £500 on the black market. We know that there are badger baiting and dog fighting gangs, so ruthless individuals would be quite happy to purchase a live badger for their perverted pastime. Given that there is no effective monitoring—the horrific video footage clearly demonstrates that—who is to say that that is not happening? The Government’s policy therefore potentially creates more wildlife crime in our country. They need to step up and take a different approach.

We know that the badger population is under threat. Between June and August, we had the highest temperatures on record—we will all remember it, won’t we? Experts tell me that it is therefore likely that large numbers of badger cubs and sows died during that very hot weather due to heat exhaustion and lack of food and water. Natural England has not undertaken any detailed or accurate population survey of badgers for more than a decade. It is important that we know what the state of the badger population is at this point in time.

About 50,000 badgers are killed every year on the road, and many die as a result of building development. The combination of the cull and other pressures is leading to the potential collapse of the badger population in certain parts of the country. Let us remember that badgers have inhabited our country since the ice age, so it would be a tragedy if they were eliminated in certain parts of it. I hope the Minister will respond to that point.

The Government claim that the badger cull reduces bovine TB in cattle, but the Zoological Society of London begs to differ. It says that there is no robust evidence at all that the policy is working. Indeed, the proportion of infected herds is about the same as it was in 2013, so the policy has been a spectacular failure. Will the Minister commit to releasing all the cull data held by DEFRA for independent verification? I would be interested to hear his response to that point.

In my opinion, we need better biosecurity, more reliable testing and movement controls. That is the real issue. We know that the TB skin test, which is the primary method of detecting TB in cattle, is not 100% successful. In fact, on average, one in four of the tests failed to detect TB. There are more accurate tests available, but the problem is that farmers are expected to meet the cost. Will the Minister commit the Government to funding the more accurate tests, rather than relying on the pretty inaccurate testing system that is currently being used, which contributes to the problem? I have already mentioned biosecurity. Slurry, which can contain TB bacteria, continues to be spread widely on farms, with few, if any, biosecurity controls. Millions of cattle continue to be moved across England with insufficient movement controls. New outbreaks of bovine TB were therefore pretty inevitable, and that is what happened in Cumbria and the Isle of Skye relatively recently.

TB fraud is also a major problem. Cattle are moved illegally, ear tags are taken out and cattle passports are altered. The enforcement controls are completely inadequate, so will the Minister explain what the Government are doing to address the inadequate biosecurity? Will he also outline what steps he is taking to address illegal cattle movements?

I was absolutely amazed to see reports in the media that infected carcases are being sold for human consumption. Several supermarkets have banned such purchases, as have several burger chains. However, The Daily Telegraph reported that a spokesperson for DEFRA, which makes £10 million a year from selling infected carcases, said:

“All meat from cattle slaughtered due to bovine TB must undergo rigorous food safety checks before it can be passed fit for consumption.”

I do not think that many people will find that particularly reassuring. I am sure that many people, if they were aware of that, would be incredibly alarmed. Is the Minister happy to continue selling carcases infected with TB for human consumption?

The Sunday Times recently reported on growing concerns about the sale of raw meat products as pet food, claiming that it could lead to an increase in TB in cats, which, in turn, could infect their owners. DEFRA does not monitor TB in domestic animals. Do the Government have any plans to investigate the scale of TB in domestic pets?

Before this cruel cull started, experts said that the policy does not make sense, that the cull is not the answer to TB in cattle and that culling risks increasing cattle TB. It seems to me that the last five years have proved that the Government’s policy is completely wrong-headed. Cicero reputedly said:

“Any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error.”

I just hope that, when the Minister gets to his feet, he will prove that he is not an idiot.

5.26 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am surprised to be speaking so early in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing the debate. He said that he is amazed that we are still debating this issue after five years. I must admit that, as I was preparing my notes, the phrase that sprung to my mind—it is a moot point whether Einstein actually said it—was:

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”.

That seems to be what is happening with badger culling. We do not have the scientific evidence to support it, as the hon. Gentleman set out.

The hon. Gentleman correctly highlighted the cost of the cull to date, and the fact that there are cheaper alternatives, such as vaccinations. He also correctly highlighted that the Government have now committed
to carrying out some vaccinations in edge areas. However, I would like the Minister to explain how there will be proper controls on that, how the effectiveness of the vaccinations in each area will be compared with the effectiveness of culling, and how the Government will make sure that there is no cross-contamination so that the different methodologies can actually be compared.

It was quite disturbing to hear about the poor practice in Cumbria. My research has highlighted real concerns about the shooting and inhumane treatment of badgers and the suffering that they undergo as a consequence. We need to hear what the Minister has to say about the monitoring of the rules and compliance with them. I also agree with the call from the hon. Member for Derby North for the Minister to say how we will deal with the possible terminal decline of the badger in certain areas because of the level of culling deemed necessary to allegedly eradicate bovine TB.

The UK Government's initial 10-year randomised badger culling trial was actually terminated, with the independent scientific group that monitored it concluding that it was not effective. There was then a change of Government and the new Government pounced on some of the figures that showed that bovine TB could be reduced and decided to permit the cull. However, the quoted possible reduction of 12% to 16% was over several years, demonstrating that the cull is not effective when measured against the effort required. It seems to me that it was a strange policy choice by the UK Government. It is stranger still that the cull is now a shooting exercise, rather than using a more humane method.

As we heard from the hon. Gentleman, as the years have gone on, the costs have accumulated and cull areas have become more extensive across England and Wales, but the disease still exists. However, proper scientific evidence of the effectiveness of culling does not exist. Culling is being rolled out further, but the evidence, if it exists at all, has not got any stronger. As the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has observed, the fact that culls are being operated so differently from the original trials means there is no way to assess their effectiveness. We do not really have any baseline figures against which to properly gauge them, so they seem a futile exercise.

The independent scientific group set out key parameters that should be followed—having boundaries that are impermeable to badgers to ensure a controlled area, and areas of between 150 and 500 sq km, for example—but those are not being adhered to in the current exercise. Again, independent guidance has not been followed, so we really do not know how effective culling is.

Scientific evidence from Ireland suggests that direct contact between badgers and cattle may not be the mechanism for bovine TB transfer, and that badgers actually tend to avoid areas where cattle are present. That means more work is required on the thesis that it is contaminated environments that allow a lot of the transfer of bovine TB. Clearly, the environment remains contaminated even if badgers are culled. We need to do much more research on that aspects rather than continue the culling exercise.

The UK should be able to assess the cost and success of culling against the cost and success of vaccinations. I appreciate that in recent debates—there have been a number on this issue—Members have highlighted that there has been a shortage of vaccinations at times, but that does not seem to be the case at the moment. There have also been new developments, such as oral bait for badgers, which seems to be more cost-effective. All that ties in with the hon. Gentleman’s call for the Government to conduct transparent cost-benefit assessments and release the data so that we can have confidence and scrutinise what goes on.

Fortunately, the risk of bovine TB in Scotland has historically been very low, and there is no evidence of a wildlife reservoir of bovine TB. In October 2009, Scotland was added to the list of European Union member states and regions that have been declared free of bovine TB. The European Commission attributed that to the success of Scotland’s livestock industry working in conjunction with the Government. The Scottish Government recognise the need for confidence on the issue and have introduced a stringent package of measures, including tissue sampling during farm visits, an epidemiological risk assessment, the tracing of cattle, contiguous herd assessments and the need for two consecutive tests with negative results to retain bovine TB-free status.

That aligns with the RSPCA’s call for better cattle husbandry, high biosecurity and improved testing to mitigate cattle to cattle transmission. Its point on cattle husbandry ties in with what the hon. Gentleman said about the need for strict enforcement of controls on the movement of cattle to ensure that they are not moved illegally, that proper source to source tracing is carried out and that people cannot change cattle tags or falsify records. That is clearly important for stopping cattle to cattle transfer.

I hope the Minister will explain how scientific information will be collated, co-ordinated, assessed and interpreted in a completely neutral manner—neutrality is important—and how relevant expert opinion will be taken where required. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

5.33 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing the debate and making such a powerful case.

Last year, almost 20,000 badgers were killed across England as part of the largest destruction of a protected British species in living memory. That policy is cruel and inhumane, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said. We need more action and a more ambitious animal welfare agenda to stop this senseless suffering.

Hon. Members will be aware that Labour is the party of animal welfare. We legislated with the landmark Hunting Act 2004 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Animal welfare has been placed highly on our party’s agenda, and that is still true today. We want to ensure that animal cruelty is consigned to the past. If animals suffer, we all suffer.

The Opposition’s position is clear: we are opposed to the culling of badgers to control bovine TB and would immediately end the ineffective and cruel badger cull. A Labour Government would instead focus on an evidence-based approach driven by science, not ideology. Every badger matters, but badgers do not have a voice. They do not have a say in politics unless we give them one. The Government are pursuing a cruel and uncaring policy towards badgers, and worst of all, it does not work.
While Ministers seek the headlines, the real hard work often goes undone. Why are Ministers not strengthening the foxhunting ban or bringing forward a Bill to increase sentences for animal welfare cruelty? We need action, not just words. Tackling bovine TB is important, especially to those in our rural communities, so we need something that actually works, unlike the badger cull. As long as Ministers cling to the ideological slaughter of British badgers, actions that genuinely tackle the spread of bovine TB are being overlooked. The badger cull is spreading, as we have heard. In Devon, the county I come from, we now have 12 culling sites—more than any other county. Thankfully, there is no badger culling yet in Plymouth, the city I represent, but I would not predict that it will not happen in the future.

A little over a month ago, The Observer published secret film taken in Cumbria, which showed a badger that took almost a minute to die after being shot in a cage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned. In fact, recent reports say that up to 22% of badgers can take more than five minutes to die in the cull, which is needless animal suffering. Over the summer the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), brought to the Government’s attention the horrific way in which badgers were being left to die in the extreme heat. Caged badgers spent hours on end trapped in the sun with no water, suffering from heat stress and eventually dying of dehydration. Despite that coming to light, little action was taken. That cruelty serves no purpose, and is another example of why the Opposition believe the badger cull to be cruel.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned, there is no scientific basis for the policy. The science does not support a badger cull, the evidence does not support a badger cull, and the Opposition do not support a badger cull. Why are the Government pursuing a policy that does not work? Why do they want to look like they are doing something? They need to look busy because if they U-turned, it would make them look weaker than they already do. We need something that works, not just a policy that is stuck to. We need animal welfare policies that are based on science, not ideology.

The Environment Secretary may be tired of experts, but this is what the experts are telling us about the cull: a study commissioned by the Government into bovine TB transmission from badgers to cattle, which took place from 1996 to 2006, concluded that “badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain.”

According to the Badger Trust, an excellent organisation that does superb work, only 5.7% of all bovine TB outbreaks involve possible transmission from badgers to cattle. That means that 94% of all bovine TB outbreaks must come from other sources. The Zoological Society of London says that most herds acquire the disease from other cattle. Ministers need to consider ensuring high levels of biosecurity, tracking movements between herds, and looking at the movement of other animals, such as foxhounds, across agricultural land.

The Minister must not sit on the report that we know his Department has received. When did the Department receive the Godfray review on the Government’s bovine TB strategy? When will it be published? Will he commit to publishing it in its original form? Can he confirm whether he has asked for any edits to the report’s recommendations or alterations to its findings? I would be grateful if he could answer those questions and address the concerns expressed by farmers, especially to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr. Drew), that the Department is telling them that their herds are TB-free when they know they are not. That is a serious issue that undermines the essential confidence between farmers and the Department.

Bovine TB is a cattle problem that needs a cattle-focused solution. A start would be to improve the current skin tests, which expose an infection in the herd but not the individual cow, which makes it very difficult to narrow down.

The badger cull is a phenomenal waste of money that could be better spent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned. The Badger Trust estimates that when everything has been added up, killing a badger costs about £1,000 per animal. The trust considers that more than £100 million could be spent on killing badgers by 2020. Just think how much better that money could be spent in rural communities. That £100 million could go an enormous way in dealing with rural poverty and the actual concerns of rural communities. Does the Minister not agree that the best way to save money in the fight against bovine TB would be to stop spending Government resources on an ideological policy that has no scientific evidence of reducing bovine TB?

Research shows that vaccinating badgers is not only a better and more humane way to eradicate TB, but is much cheaper. I recently had the opportunity to meet Dr. Brian May with my hon. Friends the Members for Workington and for Stroud. I was a little star-struck. As well as being the legendary guitarist from Queen, he has been pioneering badger vaccinations on his farm and has demonstrated their effectiveness and suitability as an alternative to the cruel badger cull. The Badger Trust estimates that vaccinating badgers costs less than £200 an animal, as compared with £1,000 for killing it—what a saving.

**Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): When the hon. Gentleman mentions a cost of £200 a badger, is that a lifetime sum or an annual sum? Vaccinations are an annual requirement, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime event.

**Luke Pollard**: That is a good point, and I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised it. When compared with the cost of killing a badger, vaccinating a badger is cheaper.

**Simon Hart**: If it is £200 for a vaccination and that has to be done annually, it soon gets to £1,000. We should also bear in mind that the vaccination will be completely pointless if the badger already has TB, as it is not a cure, and therefore the money is being wasted whatever the cost.

**Luke Pollard**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pursuing me on that point, which he has rightly spotted. However, I point him to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North raised about the Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) made about vaccination.

**Chris Williamson**: I am interested in the point that the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) made about vaccination.
I am not an expert, but my understanding is that when someone is vaccinated, they are vaccinated once and that protects them. I do not know whether badger physiology is different in some way, but as my hon. Friend the shadow Minister has pointed out, it would be useful to get that cost-benefit analysis. If the Government were to act, we would all be in the picture as to the reality of the situation.

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree with his points.

I will conclude, as the Minister has an awful lot to respond to and I would like him to get to his feet in a moment. As my hon. Friend said, there is no logical reason for the badger cull to continue, or even exist, other than an ideological one: to make the Government look busy when they are failing farmers and rural communities on bovine TB. There are less cruel ways to eradicate bovine TB than killing badgers on a massive scale. Whether it is more accurate and frequent testing of cattle, badger and cattle vaccinations or more rigid control on cattle movements, the solution should be focused on cattle, not innocent badgers. DEFRA’s priority should be to look at the other ways in which bovine TB is transmitted, rather than scapegoating badgers and perpetuating unnecessary animal cruelty. I would be grateful if the Minister could answer the points about the Godfray review in particular. An awful lot of people are waiting for the evidence base. DEFRA sitting on the report for as long as it has creates the impression that there is something in it that it wishes to hide.

5.43 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing it. I am aware that this issue is contentious. The badger is an iconic species. It is a protected species in our countryside. I completely understand that many people have strong feelings about the policy and the approach we are taking. As I and the Secretary of State have said before, none of us wants to cull badgers for any longer than is necessary. However, to answer his question, the reason why we still have these debates is that the Government are of the clear view that it is necessary to have a badger cull as part of a coherent strategy to eradicate TB. We believe that that is firmly underpinned by the evidence—I will return to that because the hon. Gentleman and others raised questions about the science.

The badger cull is just one part of our wider strategy to eradicate TB. The absolute heart of our strategy has always been regular cattle testing and removal. In the high-risk area, we currently have annual testing; we have four-yearly testing in the low-risk area; we have pre-movement testing; we introduced compulsory post-movement testing; we have radial testing in the low-risk area where we get a breakdown; and we have continuous testing in the high-risk area on the farms surrounding a breakdown. All of these measures mean that we are regularly testing our herds and regularly removing reactors to that testing.

Diagnostics, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, are important. We recognise that TB is a difficult disease to fight. It is difficult to detect because it is a slow-moving, insidious disease, and none of the diagnostic tests is perfect. However, one thing we have done is make greater use of the interferon gamma test—the blood test—to remove infection from herds when it is picked up. We are also deploying that test more proactively in areas where the cull has taken place so that we can bear down on infection in cattle. We have also introduced a more severe interpretation on inconclusive reactors to the skin test. Diagnostics are important and part of our strategy is to improve testing. We are supporting a number of initiatives to improve testing, but at the moment we are using the more sensitive blood test in conjunction with the skin test to improve our detection rates.

A number of hon. Members mentioned biosecurity, which is important—biosecurity is a key part of our strategy to eradicate TB. A few years ago, I introduced a new accreditation scheme—the cattle health certification standards scheme, or CHeCS. We encouraged farmers to sign up and to take steps to manage risk to their herd, both in terms of risk-based trading for the cattle that they bring on to their holding and in terms of protecting the herd and their farmyard from badger incursion, for instance using fencing. We recently changed the compensation regime to incentivise farmers to sign up to the biosecurity scheme, meaning that if they do not sign up to it they face receiving lower compensation for cattle reactors that they bring into their herd.

We have always been clear that vaccination, which a number of hon. Members mentioned, could have a role, particularly in the edge area, and possibly as a way of getting an exit strategy from the cull once we have borne down on the population. We have been supporting vaccination pilots in the edge area—the so-called badger edge vaccination scheme, or BEVS, which we restarted this year once vaccines became available again.

The difficulty with vaccination, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) pointed out, is that we have to catch badgers regularly to top up the vaccination. It is not the case that we can inject them just once. Vaccination does not cure badgers that have the disease, so the scheme has limitations, but we have always maintained that it could have a role to assist in an exit strategy. That is why we continue, for instance, to fund work to try and get an oral bait vaccine that we could deploy in the badger population.

Alan Brown: How do we measure the vaccination in the edge areas as opposed to culling, which has already been happening? The Government must ensure that they correctly compare two different methodologies and that there is not cross-contamination, as it were, given the movement of badgers.

George Eustice: That is a very good point and precisely why we have focused our vaccination efforts in the edge area, where we are not culling badgers. The culls are being rolled out predominantly in the high-risk area where we know the reservoir of the disease in the wildlife population is a persistent problem, and are using vaccination in the edge area to ensure that we are not vaccinating badgers only to cull them.

We are also looking at cattle vaccination. We have been developing work to do a so-called DIVA test, which can differentiate TB-infected from vaccinated animals so that it would not affect our trade. Cattle vaccination...
deployed in the hot spots could help to give immunity to our herds, and clearly cattle vaccination is easier to deploy than badger vaccination, because a herd of cattle can be run through a crush and vaccinated—we do not have to capture wildlife to do it.

Our strategy is incredibly broad. No one single intervention will give us the magic solution to tackling this terrible disease. It is a difficult disease to fight, so we need to use a range of interventions. The badger cull is just one part of our strategy, but there are no examples anywhere in the world of a country that has successfully eradicated TB without also addressing the reservoir, the disease and the wildlife population.

TB was first isolated in badgers as long ago as 1971. In 1974, a trial was conducted to remove badgers from a severely infected farm, with the result that there was no breakdown on that farm for five years afterwards. Between 1975 and 1978, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food funded extensive work that demonstrated conclusively transmission between badgers and cattle in both directions. Subsequent work in Ireland reaffirmed that finding. In the Krebs review, which hon. Members cited, it was observed that between 1975 and 1979 TB incidence in the south-west fell from 1.65% to 0.4% after the cull—a 75% reduction.

Subsequently, therefore, in the late '70s and early '80s, more extensive work was done in three exercises. One was in Thornbury, where the TB incidence fell from 5.6% in the 10 years before culling to 0.45% in the 15 years after culling, which was a reduction of 90%. In Steeple Lees, there were no breakdowns for seven years after badgers had been cleared. In Hartland, the incidence dropped from 15% in 1984 to just 4% in 1985, which was a reduction of more than two thirds.

Chris Williamson: I am interested in the Minister’s comments. Will he comment on why the weight of scientific evidence before the Government embarked on the latest cull, including from people involved in the randomised badger culling exercise, suggested that it would not work? No credible scientific evidence supported the Government, yet they ploughed on regardless. Indeed, the number of herds infected with TB has not diminished. If anything, the situation has got worse, because we now have TB in Cumbria and the Isle of Skye. Surely controls on movements and better biosecurity would be far better than continuing with this cruel cull.

George Eustice: I do not agree, for reasons I will come to.

There were claims that those trials in the '70s lacked a control or a comparison, which was a fair point. That is why the randomised badger culling trial took place. Despite the challenge of a foot and mouth crisis right in the middle of it, the RBCT concluded that, in the four years after culling, there was a significant reduction in the incidence of TB. The RBCT supported what the previous trials had shown. In fact, 18 months after the culling ended in the RBCT, there was a 54% reduction in the incidence of the disease. People say that there is no scientific evidence, but I can give them all the evidence they want.

On the current trials, we now have some peer-reviewed evidence conducted on the first two cull areas. It compares the cull areas with control areas where there was no cull. That detailed analysis of the first two cull areas, over the first two years only, was published by Dr Brunton and her colleagues in 2017. It showed a 58% reduction in the disease in cattle in the Gloucestershire badger control area, and a 21% reduction in Somerset after two years of badger control, compared with the unculled areas. As I said, that is a peer-reviewed piece of work. The Animal and Plant Health Agency published raw data, as we do every year, in September 2018, showing that there has been a drop in TB incidence in the first two cull areas, where the number of new confirmed breakdowns has decreased by about 50% in both areas. In Gloucestershire, the incidence rate has dropped from 10.4% before culling began to 5.6% in the 12 months following the fourth cull. In Somerset, it has dropped from 24% to 12%. Dr Brunton and her colleagues carried out further detailed analysis into the third year of the cull in the first two areas, and it will be published shortly.

A wealth of consistent evidence, from the 1970s onwards, shows that badgers are a reservoir for the disease, that there is transmission of the disease between badgers and cattle, and that a cull of badgers in infected areas where the presence of the disease in the wildlife is known to contribute to that can lead to substantial reductions of between 20% and 50% in incidence. That picture has been consistent for at least 40 years.

George Eustice: A number of scientists said that it was not logistically possible to sustain a cull over a large area and to remove the number of badgers necessary. We have demonstrated that that is possible. It is a difficult and contentious policy, but it is possible to do that. No credible scientist has said that badgers are not implicated in the spread of the disease. Sometimes scientists debate the extent to which badgers have a role, but no one doubts that—the evidence shows this clearly—a cull of badgers in infected areas leads to a reduction in the incidence of the disease. Arguments tend to be about the logistical possibilities of delivering such a policy but, as I said, we have been able to demonstrate that that can be done, difficult though it is.

Let me deal with some of the hon. Gentleman’s other points. One was about vaccination and, as I said, that is part of our plan, and we envisage doing more of it in future, potentially as an exit strategy once we have seen a reduction in the badger population. That brings me to his claim about the possibility of a collapse in that population. That will never happen because we have always had provision in the licensing for an absolute maximum that must never be exceeded in any given cull year. Everything we do is absolutely compliant with the Berne convention. Furthermore, we are doing this only in high-risk areas, so we never aim to remove the entire badger population or to cause a collapse in it; we simply aim to suppress numbers while we get to grips with that difficult disease.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned cull data. That is published each and every year. Usually in or around December, we give the House a written ministerial
statement and an update on all the figures from the previous year's cull. We shall do so again this year, in the normal way, as we have done in all previous years.

Kerry McCarthy: If my recollection is correct, it is common for the figures to be released on the very last day of the parliamentary term before we adjourn for Christmas. Will the Minister give us an assurance that they will be published a little earlier this year, so that we have time to reflect on them before we disappear for our Christmas holiday?

George Eustice: I cannot give any undertakings about when exactly that will take place but, typically, we do it in December, once we have collated all the data. The hon. Lady will have to be patient and wait for the data to come out. However, we publish that every year and we are absolutely transparent about it. Every year, we also publish details about incidence and prevalence of the disease—I know that there has been an argument about whether incidence or prevalence is the right figure to use, but incidence is the correct one for measuring the role of wildlife in the introduction of the disease to cattle herds.

On costs, again we publish the figures every year. The 2018 costs will be published shortly, but those for previous years have already been published. Last year, the total cost of the cull was about £4 million, which covers policing, licensing and all the monitoring work done by Natural England.1 I do not recognise the figure given by the hon. Member for Derby North of £1,000 or £2,000 a badger; it is probably in the region of a couple of hundred pounds. The costs have reduced substantially, as policing costs have come down as we have rolled out the cull but, in reality, cost per badger is the wrong way to look at it; we have to view it in the context of the fact that the disease already costs us £100 million a year—if costs are what worry us—and that if we want to get it under control, we have to use all the tools in the box.

Finally, I confirm that we received the Godfray review on 2 October and, as the Secretary of State said at DEFRA questions a couple of weeks ago, it will be published shortly. “Shortly” means what it says, which is that Members probably do not have long to wait. I can confirm that it will be published in its entirety and that we have not requested any edits or alterations. It is an independent review, led by Sir Charles Godfray, who will publish it shortly, along with his conclusions.

I should point out that Sir Charles Godfray’s review is of our strategy, so it looks at every component, including the role of badger culling, vaccination, diagnostics and whether they can be improved, biosecurity, compensation and behavioural change. It reviews every feature in our original strategy and gives some pointers about other areas that we could advance in future. I think it is a good report, and I am sure that hon. Members look forward to reading it.

Chris Williamson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way for what will perhaps be the final time. My conclusion from what he says is that it is pretty clear that the only way in which the badger cull will be brought to an end is with the election of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Government.

George Eustice: All I can say is that I have explained why we think the badger cull is critical. I know that it is contentious, but it is the right thing to do, and sometimes Governments have to do the right and responsible thing. We have this mess today because the last Labour Government put their heads in the sand, meaning that we had 15 years of total inaction during the early part of this century. The disease got out of hand, and we are now trying to get a grip of it and to roll it back.

Chris Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I have finished.

6.1 pm

Chris Williamson: I am disappointed that the Minister did not give way at the end. I think it is very unfair to characterise the situation as being the fault of the previous Labour Government. Let us remember that it was the previous Labour Government who—rather controversially—actually backed the randomised badger cull tests from which the conclusion was drawn that the way to tackle bovine TB was not through a badger cull.

I repeat that the body of evidence from the scientists involved in the randomised badger cull tests showed that carrying on with the badger cull could have made matters worse. We have seen over the last five years of this horrific cull, which continues, that, even putting the appalling cruelty to one side, it is simply not working. It is all very well for the Minister to get up and say that various peer-reviewed reports have implied that it has worked, but the evidence speaks for itself. How can the Minister stand there and say that it has worked when the proportion of TB in cattle herds is virtually the same as at the start of the cull, and when it has even spread to other areas?

The Government are looking in the wrong direction. I heard what the Minister said, but I implore him to go back and look again at pursuing a different route, at the cattle movements, at the fraud that takes place, at biosecurity and at doing proper testing and supporting farmers in doing so, rather than expecting them to stump up for the bill. This is an appalling state of affairs. I repeat that there is no scientific evidence to support the Government’s position. Public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to the badger cull, which does not serve the farming community in any way, shape or form and certainly does not serve the interests of wildlife in our country. I hope that the Minister will reflect on the comments made and adopt a more sensible and humane approach to the bovine TB situation in this country.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the badger cull.

6.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 October 2018

DEFENCE

Call-out Order: Air Policing Operations

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Changes made by the Defence Reform Act 2014 allow reservists to be called out under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 if it appears to the Secretary of State that it is necessary or desirable to use members of a reserve force for any purpose for which members of the regular services may be used. Reservists called out under this power may be required to serve for a period of up to 12 months.

A new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called into permanent service in support of the United Kingdom’s contribution to air policing operations.

With the changing international strategic threat, I consider there is a requirement for an order that enables the mobilisation of reservists to support tasks which provide for, or contribute to UK air security and policing, including associated strategic tasks. This order also provides for related activity elsewhere in the world, including, for example, the protection of the UK’s overseas territories, providing force protection for air assets, in so far as the activity provides for, or contributes, to the continued security of the UK, its overseas territories, service people and assets.

The order takes effect from the beginning of 1 November 2018 and shall cease to have effect at the end of 29 September 2019, making it coterminous with other standing call-out orders.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Cross-Border Access: Electronic Access in Criminal Matters

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Until the UK leaves it remains a full member of the European Union with all the rights and responsibilities this entails. The Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt-in to, or opt-out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

The Government have decided not to opt-in to the proposal of the European Parliament and the Council on European production orders and European preservation orders for cross-border access to electronic evidence in criminal matters.

Law enforcement access to data held by service providers is an important issue and we support the underlying objective of improving cross-border access to electronic evidence. However, from the start of discussions on this issue, we have not supported the need for new EU legislation. That is because it is not clear that new EU legislation will be a practical and effective way to address the global issue of providing lawful access to data held anywhere in the world.
Written Statements

Tuesday 23 October 2018

TREASURY

Mutual Deferred Shares

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
The Government have decided not to lay the secondary legislation required to give effect to the provisions in the Mutuals’ Deferred Shares Act 2015, which enable mutual insurers to raise equity by issuing mutual deferred shares (MDS). The Government have consulted widely with industry representatives in reaching their decision. During that consultation, industry representatives informed the Government that mutual insurers would only issue MDS if they qualified as tier 1 regulatory capital and would not alter the tax status of any mutual that issued MDS. It has not been possible to design MDS which meet both these criteria. The Government have, therefore, decided not to lay the regulations. The Government would reconsider their position if any material factors changed in the future.

[HCWS1026]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley):
I have received the first substantive report from the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC).

The IRC was established by the UK Government and the Irish Government by way of an international treaty to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. This emanated from the Fresh Start agreement of November 2015. The agreement set out the Northern Ireland Executive’s responsibility for tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality. This work is being taken forward through a Northern Ireland Executive action plan which contains 43 recommendations.

This is a significant report which benchmarks the progress which has been achieved to date and reminds us of the challenging work still to be done to ensure that communities are freed from the threat of paramilitarism.

The absence of a functioning Executive has obviously had an impact on this important work. Despite intensive efforts it has not yet been possible for the parties in Northern Ireland to reach political agreement. I remain resolute in finding a way forward in relation to that. This is why I am taking legislation through this House to provide for a limited period in which the parties can engage in talks and form an Executive.

I have today presented this report, along with the IRC’s annual report and accounts for 2017-18, to Parliament.

I would like to thank the commissioners for all of their work to date.

[HCWS1027]
Written Statements

Wednesday 24 October 2018

TREASURY

Valuation Office Agency

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
I am today announcing the start of a tailored review of
the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). As an Executive
agency of HM Revenue and Customs, the VOA is
required to undergo a tailored review at least once in
each Parliament. The structure, efficiency and effectiveness
of the VOA and the governance arrangements it has in
place will be considered as part of this review. I will
inform the House of the outcome of the review as
appropriate.

[HCWS1092]

EDUCATION

Teachers' Pay Grant

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today
I am confirming the allocations for the teachers’ pay
grant for 2018-19.

The teachers’ pay grant was announced on 24 July by
the Secretary of State for Education. This will be worth
£508 million in total and will fully fund the 2018-19
academic year pay award to the end of the spending
review period, over and above the 1% rise schools would
have expected and been planning for.

On 14 September the Department for Education
published the rates and high-level methodology for the
teachers’ pay grant.

The grant will be paid to all state-funded schools and
academies, including maintained nursery schools. This
will be on the basis of pupil numbers in mainstream
schools, and place numbers in special schools and other
specialist provision. All schools will be funded for at
least 100 pupils or 40 places.

Funding for mainstream schools will be allocated on
the basis of pupil numbers and each school will have a
specific allocation which cannot be modified by the
local authority.

Local authorities will receive an allocation in respect
of specialist provision in their area. This will be based
on the number of places in each school, with all schools
being funded for at least 40 places. The local authority
will have the flexibility to allocate funding to the schools
in their area, taking into account the particular circumstance
of the schools and following consultation with them.

Further details and guidance will be published on
gov.uk.

[HCWS1028]
The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I am today announcing the reappointment of Kevin McGinty CBE as the Chief Inspector of HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate for a further two years. Mr McGinty was appointed in April 2015 for four years and his contract was due to finish on 31 March 2019.

The Prime Minister has been notified of this reappointment. Also, this role is subject to scrutiny by the Justice Select Committee. The Committee, to which I am most grateful has been consulted and fully supports the reappointment.

[HCWS1032]

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today I am publishing the updated list of Cabinet Committees and implementation task forces (ITFs).

The updated list includes a new National Security Council (Cross-Government Funds) Sub-Committee, which will provide strategic direction to the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and the Prosperity Fund.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees

[HCWS1035]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): Section 18 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 conferred a legal obligation for a Minister of the Crown to lay before both Houses of Parliament a statement in writing outlining the steps taken by Her Majesty’s Government to seek to negotiate an agreement, as part of the framework for the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the EU, for the United Kingdom to participate in a customs arrangement with the EU, before 31 October 2018.

The Government published a White Paper earlier this year setting out their proposal for the UK’s future relationship with the EU, including a new customs arrangement. The UK proposed the establishment of a free trade area for goods that would avoid friction at the border, protect jobs and livelihoods, and ensure that the UK and the EU could meet their commitments to Northern Ireland and Ireland through the overall future relationship. The new customs arrangement would support this by removing the need for customs checks and controls at the border between the UK and the EU, while allowing the UK to forge new trading relationships with partners around the world.

The UK would apply the EU’s tariffs and trade policy for goods intended for the EU, and the UK’s tariffs and trade policy for goods intended for the UK. Mirroring the EU’s customs approach at its external border would ensure that goods entering the EU via the UK have complied with EU customs processes and the correct EU duties have been paid. This would include the UK maintaining a common customs rulebook with the EU. It would remove the need for customs declarations, routine requirements for rules of origin, and entry and exit summary declarations. Together with the wider free trade area, the new customs arrangement would preserve frictionless trade for the majority of UK goods trade, and reduce frictions for UK trade with the rest of the world through a range of unilateral and bilateral facilitations. The UK’s goal is to facilitate the greatest possible trade, whether with the EU or the rest of the world. There would need to be a phased approach to implementation of the model.

The UK recognises that this approach would need to be consistent with the integrity of the EU’s customs union and that the EU would need to be confident that goods cannot enter its customs territory without the correct tariff and trade policy being applied. To that end, the UK proposed that where a good reached the UK border and the destination could not be robustly demonstrated at the point of import, it would pay the higher of the UK or EU tariff. Where the goods destination was later identified to be in the lower tariff jurisdiction, it would be eligible for a repayment from the UK Government equal to the difference between the two tariffs. The UK proposed agreeing with the EU a new trusted trader scheme to allow firms to pay the correct tariff at the UK border without needing to engage with the repayment mechanism. Both sides would need to agree the circumstances in which repayments could be granted, which is most likely to be relevant to intermediate goods. The UK also proposed agreeing a mechanism with the EU for the remittance of relevant tariff revenue, such as a tariff revenue formula, taking account of goods destined for the UK entering via the EU and goods destined for the EU entering via the UK.

To ensure that new declarations and border checks between the UK and the EU do not need to be introduced for VAT and excise purposes, the UK also proposed the application of common cross-border processes and procedures for VAT and excise, as well as some administrative co-operation and information exchange to underpin risk-based enforcement. These common processes and procedures would apply to the trade in goods, small parcels and to individuals travelling with goods (including alcohol and tobacco) for personal use.

The UK’s proposal is designed to make the arrangements as simple as possible for those who need to use them, and the UK would continue to explore options to use future advancements in technology to streamline the process.

As the Prime Minister set out in her update to the House of Commons on 22 October 2018, Official Report, column 46, we have made good progress in negotiations with the EU on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. On the
political declaration on our future relationship, the UK
and the EU have discussed each element of the UK’s
proposals, including the future customs arrangement.
The UK will continue to work with the European
Union on finalising the withdrawal agreement and the
political declaration on our future relationship and, as
set out in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018,
the House of Commons must vote to approve that deal
before the withdrawal agreement can be ratified.

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting
the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan,
Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has
made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC)
meeting on 16 October in Luxembourg. A provisional report
of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the
Council of the European Union’s website at:
Preparation of October European Council

The Council discussed the draft conclusions for the European
Council meeting on 18 October at which leaders from the 28 EU
states discussed migration, internal security and external relations.

Ministers were content with the conclusions text on migration.
I stated that the UK viewed the text as being balanced and
welcomed the focus on developing operational outcomes. I also
welcomed the intention to tackle people-smuggling networks and
monitor and disrupt their online communications.

On internal security, I welcomed the references to the attack in
Salisbury in March and the attempted cyber-attack carried out
against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
(OPCW) in April. I called for the acceleration of work to establish
a cyber toolkit capable of responding to malicious cyber-attacks
through restrictive measures.

Following Ministers’ discussions, the European Council discussed
external relations, including the EU-Africa partnership and the
upcoming summit between the 28 EU member states with the
League of Arab States on 24 and 25 February 2019.

Rule of law in Poland

The Commission updated the Council on the most recent
developments regarding the rule of law in Poland. The Commission
called for a further hearing at a future meeting of the Council. In
previous discussions on this matter, the UK has intervened to
highlight the importance of the rule of law. Consequently, I did
not intervene on this occasion.

Respect for EU values in Hungary

The presidency provided the Council with an update on the
next procedural steps following the European Parliament’s triggering
of the article 7(1) TEU process against Hungary and I intervened to
reaffirm the value that the UK places on the importance of the
rule of law.

Multiannual financial framework

The presidency provided the Council with an assessment of the
latest position in the ongoing multiannual financial framework
discussions.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sexual Exploitation in the Aid Sector

The Secretary of State for International Development
(Penny Mordaunt): Following my oral statement of
20 February and my written ministerial statements of
20 March and 17 May, I am updating the House on the
outcomes of the international summit that I hosted in
London on 18 October, Putting People First: Tackling
Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment
in the Aid Sector.

The aims of the summit

Last week’s summit followed the event on 5 March
which I co-hosted with the Charity Commission and
where I announced new, enhanced safeguarding standards
for the organisations DFID works with. The 18 October
summit was attended by over 500 participants and
focused on driving up the safeguarding standards of
organisations worldwide who work in the international
aid sector.

Aid must be delivered in a way which does no harm.
If not, we will have failed in our duty to protect the
most vulnerable. We must deter wrongdoing and hold
perpetrators to account. This includes enabling prosecutions
by law enforcement agencies if justified.

This work is driven by four things: our determination
to prevent incidents of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse
and sexual harassment from happening in the aid sector
in the first place; to listen to those who are affected
when it does occur; to respond robustly but sensitively;
and to learn from every case.

The summit helped provide a focus for the work
driven by the UK since February. Our major partners
were asked to attend the summit with concrete practical
actions which will bring about significant changes. I am
pleased that many of them rose to the challenge.

Donors (representing over 90% of global official
development assistance in 2017), the United Nations,
international financial institutions, CDC (the UK’s
development finance institution) and representatives of
around 500 major British NGOs, contractors and research
organisations each presented commitments. In total,
there were eight separate sets of collective commitments.

Each document stated what that group of organisations
will do to achieve four long-term fundamental changes—or
strategic shifts—to fundamentally rewrite the way the
aid sector operates, from root to branch:

- Ensure support for survivors, victims and whistleblowers;
  enhance accountability and transparency; strengthen reporting;
  and tackle impunity;
- Incentivise cultural change through strong leadership,
  organisational accountability and better human resource
  processes;
- Adopt global standards and ensure they are met or exceeded;
  and
- Strengthen organisational capacity and capability across the
  international aid sector to meet these standards.

Specific initiatives unveiled at the summit

Measures announced to help deliver the four shifts
included:

- a new international vetting scheme for aid workers led by
  Interpol, to be piloted over five years with DFID funding, to
deter abusers from entering the sector and to identify and
arrest them quickly if they do;

- UK NGOs with support from DFID will test a “passport”
  for aid workers to prove an individual’s identity, provide
  background information on their previous employment and
  vetting status;

- a new disclosure of misconduct scheme across the NGO
  sector to prevent known perpetrators moving around
  undetected—organisations with over 50,000 staff have already
  signed up, and I expect the coverage to increase significantly
  in the months ahead;
agreement among 22 major donors on common global safeguarding standards which organisations must meet if they want to receive funding from those donors; a resource and support hub funded by DFID to help smaller organisations understand and meet those standards, including access to specialist investigators; all donors and other participants committed to have at least one named senior level champion accountable for work on safeguarding issues and to encourage annual discussions of safeguarding at board level as well as the recruitment and career development of women throughout organisations; DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will support the development of a United Nations statement of victims’ rights to allow people to understand their rights, and to have confidence that they can find help if those rights are threatened or violated; and the Disasters Emergency Committee to test shared reporting hotlines for raising concerns in future emergencies, along with a review of how they respond to community feedback.

Next steps to ensure delivery

The measures agreed will help to deliver root-and-branch change in the way the aid sector approaches safeguarding issues. They send a powerful message to any individuals who might look to exploit power imbalances and the vulnerability of those who the aid sector is there to help. They also send a powerful message that survivors and victims’ voices must be heard.

In the interests of transparency and accountability the sets of commitments made by the UK with 21 other donors, and those made by our major domestic and international partners can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/safeguarding-summit-2018. A fuller outcome summary is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-summit-2018-hosts-outcome-summary along with other key documents from the day. My Department will continue to report on progress via its annual report to Parliament.

This remains a long-term agenda requiring leadership and culture change. That is why donors agreed to meet no later than October 2019 to assess progress on their commitments, while continuing to liaise regularly to keep up the pace of progress and share lessons. Donors also agreed to support the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to formulate a new DAC instrument that in 2019 will set standards on preventing and managing the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse in development co-operation, and drive donor accountability in meeting them. The 12 commitments to change in the UK NGO document presented to the summit will become part of the Bond Charter, which forms the common vision, purpose, values and principles of the Bond network covering more than 420 international development and humanitarian organisations. Other commitment documents include similar tools for tracking progress.

The summit galvanised the whole sector and provided a framework which was previously lacking to drive further progress. I will continue to ensure this issue remains a focus across the international system as there is still much work to do. But the summit was a key moment to say “No more” and to deliver some of the practical tools to give the people that the aid sector is here to help the protection that they need.

[HCWS1033]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Envoys to Tanzania and Kenya

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has approved two new appointments to the trade envoy programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has been appointed as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Kenya and my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Tanzania. These new appointments take the total number to 33 parliamentarians covering 63 markets. The Prime Minister’s trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, which supports the UK’s ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets.

[HCWS1030]

World Trade Organisation Update

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I am pleased to announce to the House that following the circulation of our goods schedule at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, the period for certification has ended. As expected, some trading partners have expressed reservations about our proposed treatment of tariff rate quotas (TRQs). I am therefore announcing today that the UK intends to enter negotiations with relevant partners under article XXVIII of the general agreement on tariffs and trade. The notification to formally invite claims in that process is now being prepared. Through the article XXVIII process the aim is to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion that maintains the balance of rights and obligations for the UK and our trading partners.

[HCWS1034]

JUSTICE

Justice Programme: Opt-in Decision

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government have decided not to opt in to a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council establishing a justice programme.

The justice programme aims to support judicial co-operation in civil and criminal matters, promote judicial training and facilitate access to justice. It forms part of the justice, rights and values fund within the proposals for the EU’s new multiannual financial framework, the EU’s budget for the period 2021-27. The proposal has a justice and home affairs legal base, and so the UK must take an opt-in decision under title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union.

Given that the justice programme will run from January 2021 to December 2027, the UK will have left the EU and come to the end of any anticipated implementation period (which would conclude in December 2020) before the programme comes into effect. The European Commission has therefore drafted the regulation establishing the
programme on the basis that the UK will not be able to participate as an EU member state, as it will no longer be part of the European Union. Opting in to the proposal would not automatically allow us to participate in the justice programme when it comes into effect, but it would allow the UK to have a vote on the proposals until March 2019 and potentially influence its development. If we wanted to join the programme after leaving the EU, we would need to negotiate with the European Commission to do so as a third country.

The UK did not opt in to the existing justice programme running from 2014-20. It was considered that the benefits to the UK from the programme (in terms of receiving funding for UK organisations to carry out activities under the programme) did not outweigh its costs to the Government.

Given these reasons, the Government have concluded that it is not in the national interest to opt in to the justice programme.

[HCWS1037]
Written Statements

Friday 26 October 2018

DEFENCE

HMS Victory 1744

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to apologise for an error made in a written response to a parliamentary question asked by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The question and answer were as follows:

*Asked on 28 October 2014*

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, whether completion bonds or other financial arrangements will be put in place before granting the Maritime Heritage Foundation permission to recover at risk surface items from the wreck site of HMS Victory 1744, and what specific communications there have been between government departments on that matter.

*Answer on 5 November 2014*

Minister of State for Defence, Welfare and Veterans, the Rt. Hon. Anna Soubry MP: Funding for the approved next stage of the project (recovery of at-risk surface items, subject to a licence by the Marine Management Organisation) is underwritten by a financial bond provided by Odyssey Marine Exploration and held by the Ministry of Defence (MOD). Funding of the project has been discussed by officials from MOD and the Department for Culture Media and Sport as part of the assessment of the Project Design.

Additionally, this response was repeated in a second parliamentary question raised by the right hon. Member for North Durham on 28 November 2014, answered by the then Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), on 4 December 2014 (PQ UIN 216395).

Subsequent investigations have proved that this information was incorrect. No funding was held by either the Ministry of Defence or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

As the current Minister for Defence People and Veterans, I wish to correct this error. I have also written to the right hon. Member for North Durham, and the responding Ministers at the time, my right hon. Friends the Members for Broxtowe and for Wantage, to apologise for this error.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 15 October 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 15 October. It was chaired by the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

Current Affairs

Ministers discussed current affairs issues including the Jamal Khashoggi case on which they agreed the need for a full and transparent investigation by the Saudi authorities in complete co-operation with the Turkish authorities. My right hon. Friend welcomed the new chemical weapons sanctions regime and EU solidarity since the Salisbury attack. He noted the attack on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and called for new sanctions regimes to address cyber and human rights abuses. He also spoke about Burma and the UN fact-finding mission.

Libya

The discussion on Libya focused on the political process, the stability of the country, and the economic situation. Ministers reiterated the EU’s support for the political process led by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General’s Special Representative, Ghassan Salamé. The Council confirmed the EU’s determination to support a Libyan-led solution for the Libyan people under UN auspices.

The discussions also considered the forthcoming high-level meeting on Libya that will take place in Palermo, Italy on 12-13 November 2018. The Council underlined the importance of holding both presidential and parliamentary elections as soon as possible, and the need to put in place a proper constitutional and legal framework before the elections take place.

External aspects of migration

The Director-General of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Antonio Vitorino, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Filippo Grandi, briefed Ministers during this session. Ministers took stock of progress and recent developments, and underlined the importance of the strategic partnership between the EU, the IOM and the UNHCR in Libya. The Council emphasised the significant results delivered through the joint efforts of the EU, its member states and UN agencies. Irregular migration flows to Europe have significantly decreased, and efforts to tackle irregular migration and to fight smuggling networks have been considerably strengthened, in particular through Operation Sophia.

Central African Republic

The Council discussed and adopted conclusions on the Central African Republic (CAR). The conclusions underlined that the situation in the CAR remained fragile and the EU continued to engage in supporting the country. The conclusions also stated that the EU would continue working, through its various instruments, to support the CAR to achieve stability, peace and development and to meet the aspirations of its entire population for lasting peace and reconciliation.

Venezuela

Ministers discussed the situation in Venezuela, and its impact on the region, including on migration. Ministers reaffirmed the EU’s strong position on the political crisis in Venezuela. They agreed that the crisis could only be solved through a political process and to
explore the possibility of establishing a contact group that could, if conditions were met, help to facilitate such a process.

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

1. The Council adopted a new regime of restrictive measures to address the use and proliferation of chemical weapons;
2. The Council adopted conclusions on “Connecting Europe and Asia—Building blocks for an EU strategy”;
3. The Council adopted conclusions on Bosnia and Herzegovina/Operation EUFOR Althea;
4. The Council decided to extend the EU stabilisation action in Mopti and Ségou (EUSTAMS) for a period of three months;
5. The Council extended the EU restrictive measures against ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda and persons, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them until 31 October 2019;
6. The Council adopted new rules of procedures for the Joint Committee established by the EU-Vietnam framework agreement on comprehensive partnership and co-operation;
7. The Council agreed the signing, on behalf of the EU, of a protocol to the Euro-Mediterranean agreement establishing an association between the EU and Tunisia or order to take account of the accession of Croatia to the EU;
8. The Council adopted the EU programme of exercises and exercise-related activities under the common foreign and security policy for the period 2018-22;
9. The Council extended the mandate of the EU advisory mission (EUAM) Iraq until 17 April 2020;
10. The Council adopted a recommendation providing detailed guidance on the objectives and progress indicators for the fulfilment by each participating member state of the more binding commitments that have been undertaken when the permanent structured co-operation (PESCO) was launched at the end of 2017;
11. The Council approved the High Representative’s report on the operation commander’s 28th six-monthly report on Operation EUFOR Althea;
12. The Council adopted a regulation on the research and training programme of the European Atomic Energy Community for the years 2019 and 2020;
13. The Council approved a joint statement for the occasion of the second Arctic science ministerial meeting that will take place in Berlin on 25 and 26 October 2018. [HCWS1042]

Wilton Park: Tailored Review

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am announcing today the publication of the recent tailored review of Wilton Park, an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Wilton Park convenes discreet dialogue on the UK’s strategic foreign policy priorities. It has shaped and delivered events since 1946, which link a global network of experts from sectors including academia, the military, civil society, business, politicians and diplomats.

The principal aim of tailored reviews, which are carried out according to Cabinet Office guidance, is to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, well governed and properly accountable for what they do. The full report can be read on gov.uk.

This review involved consultation with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK and beyond, including Wilton Park staff, the Wilton Park board, commercial and academic sponsors, and a full range of partner organisations.

The review reported in September 2018. It found that Wilton Park is functioning well as an organisation. It recommended that it should remain an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and remain at Wiston House at least until the end of the current lease in 2027.

The review nonetheless contains a number of recommendations to refresh and strengthen Wilton Park’s corporate governance. A plan to implement all the recommendations by their stated deadlines has been developed and agreed between the FCO and Wilton Park, and will be taken forward by officials.

Copies of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. [HCWS1041]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Future Reciprocal Healthcare Arrangements

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): Today, the Government are introducing the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill. This will provide the Government with the powers that are needed to fund and effectively implement arrangements for UK nationals to obtain healthcare abroad after the UK exits the European Union (EU).

Current EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements enable UK nationals to access healthcare when they live, study, work, or travel abroad and visa-versa for EU citizens when in the UK. They give people more life options, and support tourism, businesses, and healthcare co-operation. The UK also has a number of reciprocal healthcare agreements with non-EU and European Economic Area countries, such as Australia and New Zealand.

These arrangements ensure that UK nationals living and working in the EU, EEA and Switzerland can access healthcare in exchange for paying taxes and social security contributions. The UK also funds healthcare abroad for a number of current or former UK residents. This includes healthcare for UK state pensioners who spend their retirement in the EU and needs arising when UK residents visit the EU for holiday or study through the European healthcare insurance card (EHIC) Scheme.

The Bill is part of the Government’s preparations for EU exit and will ensure that whatever the outcome of EU exit, the Government can take the necessary steps to continue reciprocal healthcare arrangements or otherwise support UK residents to obtain healthcare when they move to or visit the EU.

Presently, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has limited domestic powers to fund and arrange healthcare outside the UK. When the UK leaves the EU the current EU regulations will no longer be part of UK law and new legislation will be needed.

This Bill confers powers on the Secretary of State to make and arrange for payments to be made in respect of the cost of healthcare provided outside the UK. This would allow for the funding of reciprocal healthcare arrangements for UK nationals living in the EU, EEA and Switzerland.

The Bill also confers powers on the Secretary of State to make regulations for and in connection with the provision of healthcare abroad and to give effect to
healthcare agreements with other countries or territories 
(both EU and non-EU) or supranational bodies such as 
the EU.

Finally, the Bill provides for the lawful processing of 
data where necessary for purposes of implementing, 
operating or facilitating the operation of reciprocal 
healthcare arrangements or payments.

Current healthcare agreements benefit people in all 
parts of the UK, assisting people to obtain healthcare 
when they are abroad. The UK Government are therefore 
engaging with the devolved Administrations to deliver 
an approach that works for the whole UK in a way that 
fully respects the devolution settlements.

The Bill underscores the Government’s commitment 
to reaching a reciprocal healthcare agreement with the 
EU, or where necessary making agreements with member 
states, and to exploring potential agreements with third 
countries in the future.

The Government welcome the forthcoming scrutiny 
of the Bill, to ensure that it achieves its aims for the 
continuation of healthcare support for UK nationals in 
the EU, EEA and Switzerland after the UK exits the 
EU, but also enabling the UK to look to the future.

[HCWS1040]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities 
and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today 
publishing a consultation on updates to national planning 
policy and guidance. This consultation proposes changes 
to the standard method for calculating local housing 
need to ensure consistency, with the objective of delivering 
300,000 homes per year, on average, by the mid-2020s 
while providing the clarity that communities need. The 
consultation also proposes clarifications of national 
planning policy on housing land supply, the definition of 
deliverable sites and appropriate assessment for 
habitats sites.

Our reforms are enabling local planning authorities 
to plan for the right homes in the right places, in a way 
that is open, transparent and sustainable for local 
communities. A key part of this is a standard method 
for assessing housing need. This has been introduced to 
ensure a consistent starting point when understanding 
how many homes are needed in each local area.

Recent changes to one of the statistical datasets the 
standard method relies on has led to confusion and 
uncertainty in some areas about how many homes are 
needed. This consultation therefore proposes changes 
to the standard method to ensure consistency, with 
the objective of building more homes, while ensuring 
local authorities have the clarity they need to produce 
local plans.

This consultation is open until 7 December, and I will 
inform the House of the outcome of the consultation as 
appropriate.

[HCWS1044]
I can also announce that Claire Bassett has been recruited to DIT as TRA chief executive-designate. Claire offers extensive public body leadership experience, having most recently served as chief executive of the Electoral Commission. Prior to that, she has been chief executive of the Parole Board for England and Wales and the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

Once the TRA has been legally established, the TRA chair will be responsible for making a final decision on the appointment of a TRA chief executive, subject to my approval. This is consistent with the appointment powers set out in the Trade Bill.

I am also pleased to say that the future TRA's wider senior leadership team has also now been recruited to DIT—including its chief economist, chief operating officer, general counsel and joint chief investigators. It is our intention that they will be transferred to the TRA once it has been legally established.

Sir David, Claire and the senior leadership team will join the Department’s “shadow” TRA function in its Reading office premises in Northgate House, in the near future. Located in the heart of Reading, Northgate House offers excellent transport links and will enable the TRA to serve the whole of the UK effectively. Reading has one of the highest concentrations of relevant skills in the country and this is in addition to having access to Reading's university and leading businesses. By securing these office premises now, we have ensured that future TRA staff have a location in which to be properly trained in preparation for the UK’s exit from the EU and the TRA being legally established through Royal Assent of the Trade Bill.

[HCWS1046]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The “Supplement to the Fortieth Annual Report on Senior Salaries 2018” is published today. The supplement follows the Senior Salaries Review Body's (SSRB) annual and major reviews of judicial pay. Copies are available from the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office. I am grateful to the chairman and members of the review body for their work in undertaking these reviews.

The Government value the vital role played by the judiciary. Our judges are the envy of the world. They deservedly have the very highest reputation for integrity and independence. They deliver justice every day in courts and tribunals across the land without fear or favour, and in doing so uphold the rule of law on which our society is founded. Beyond that fundamental role, the quality and dependability of our judiciary is a critical part of making the UK an attractive place to settle disputes, and English law a pre-eminent choice for contracts.

I am pleased therefore to confirm today that members of the judiciary will receive a pay increase of 2% in 2018/19, which is the biggest pay rise for judges in nearly 10 years. This award will be backdated to April 2018.

In reaching our final position for the 2018/19 pay award, the Government have had to balance the need for affordability for the tax payer and future sustainability of public services while ensuring that pay awards are fair and consistent across the public sector. Therefore, the Government have not accepted in full the SSRB’s recommended increase of 2.5%.

The SSRB has also, at the Government’s request, conducted a major review of the judicial salary structure. This is a comprehensive assessment of the appropriate structure and levels of judicial pay for the future, taking into account the need to recruit and retain judicial office holders of the highest calibre.

In its major review report, which I am also publishing today, the SSRB highlight evidence of a growing recruitment problem at certain key levels within the judiciary—notably at High Court and circuit bench level. The SSRB conclude that these problems are principally occurring because the reward package has become much less attractive to potential applicants, and highlight in particular the impact of recent pensions changes on judicial reward.

The SSRB have made a series of recommendations, including that varying levels of pay increase are made across different salary groups, with the biggest increases recommended for those judges in salary groups where there is evidence of a recruitment problem and who are in the new judicial pension scheme 2015.

The Government take very seriously the threat that being unable to fill key judicial posts represents to the proper functioning of justice and the UK’s wider prosperity. We are now carefully considering what changes might be made to the judicial remuneration package to address the particular issues highlighted by the SSRB’s major review.

The Government will also be considering the SSRB’s recommendations on changes to the current judicial salary structure and their proposals for new pay supplements for those judges who undertake extra leadership responsibilities. I can also confirm that the Government will honour their commitment to maintain the recruitment and retention allowance currently paid to eligible High Court judges until they have responded to the major review.

This Government remain committed to ensuring our courts and tribunals system is as efficient as possible. Through our reform programme we have already taken important steps towards enabling judges to make the best possible use of their time, and I will continue to work towards this objective in partnership with the Lord Chief Justice and Senior President of Tribunals.

I will make a further statement to the House when I am in a position to set out in full the Government’s response to the major review.

[HCWS1045]

TRANSPORT

Crossrail Update

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): On 31 August 2018, Crossrail Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Transport for London (TfL), announced a delay to the planned opening of the Elizabeth line.

Discussions between TfL and Government are under way as to how any additional funding will be provided, with London—as the primary beneficiary of Crossrail—bearing any additional costs via a financing arrangement.
TfL and the Department for Transport have commissioned an independent review of Crossrail’s governance and a separate review on Crossrail’s finance and commercial position.

Today, as an interim measure, we are announcing that £350 million of short-term repayable financing will be made available to the Mayor for the year 2018-19. This will ensure that full momentum is maintained behind Crossrail.

This project is already delivering benefits for the whole of the UK through its cross-country supply chain and its UK-built train fleet. When open, Crossrail will be transformative and carry up to 200 million passengers a year, delivering £42 billion of investment into the UK economy.

A further update will be provided once the discussions on the financing arrangements have concluded.

[HCWS1043]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Civil Partnerships

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): This Government are committed to fairness and equal treatment in all areas of life. Families, in all their forms, are a fundamental element of society, and we want to ensure that they are as secure and stable as possible, in order for people to flourish.

Civil partnerships were originally created to enable same-sex couples to formalise their relationships at a time when marriage was not available to them. Since then, we are pleased to have introduced marriage for same-sex couples through the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013. However, this created a situation whereby same-sex couples have the option either to marry or form a civil partnership, but opposite-sex couples have only the option to marry.

The Government have been considering how to equalise access to civil partnerships between same-sex and opposite-sex couples and on 2 October, the Prime Minister announced that the Government will extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples.

There are around 3.3million cohabiting couples in the UK, almost half of them with children, and all of them without the protections and security that a formalised relationship can bring. The announcement ensures that, in future, opposite-sex couples will be able to benefit from the protections and security that a civil partnership provides.

I would like to pay tribute to those who have campaigned for this change over a number of years, including my hon. Friend for East Worthing and Shoreham, whose commitment to this cause has laid the foundation for the Government to take forward this important change through his support for the cause of equal civil partnerships, and his Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, currently before the House.

The changes needed to effect the greater equality we wish to see are not all straightforward and there are a number of questions that arise specifically about opening civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples for the first time, on which we will need to consult. For example, whether couples can choose to convert their civil partnership into a marriage (or vice-versa) and what should be the grounds for dissolution of an opposite-sex civil partnership.

We are clear that Government legislation is essential to ensure that these and other consequentials of opposite-sex civil partnerships are properly legislated for and adequately debated by this House and in the other place. This would not be possible through my hon. Friend’s Bill as currently amended.

We intend to consult to enable us to introduce legislation in the next parliamentary Session to bring about the necessary changes.

[HCWS1039]
Written Statement

Monday 29 October 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I am writing to inform the House that the Government are pleased to accept all the Low Pay Commission’s recommendations for the new National Living Wage and National Minimum Wage rates, which will come into force in April 2019.

The Low Pay Commission is an internationally renowned independent and expert body which conducts extensive analysis and stakeholder research to make its recommendations.

The Low Pay Commission has recommended that:
- the National Living Wage (for workers aged 25 and over) should increase from £7.83 to £8.21;
- the rate for 21 to 24-year-olds should increase from £7.38 to £7.70;
- the rate for 18 to 20-year-olds should increase from £5.90 to £6.15;
- the rate for 16 to 17-year-olds should increase from £4.20 to £4.35; and
- the apprentice rate (for apprentices aged under 19 or in the first year of their apprenticeship) should increase from £3.70 to £3.90.

The Low Pay Commission has also recommended that the accommodation offset increases from the current rate of £7.00 to £7.55 from 1 April 2019.

We welcome the Low Pay Commission’s recommendation of an increase to the National Living Wage rate such that it remains on path to reach 60% of median earnings by 2020 subject to sustained economic growth.

The new National Living Wage rate of £8.21 will be the highest ever UK minimum wage and benefit around 2.4 million workers. From April 2019, a full-time minimum wage worker will see their earnings increase by over £2,750 over the course of the year, compared to when the NLW was introduced in April 2016.

The Low Pay Commission’s recommendations for the National Minimum Wage youth rates are well ahead of forecast inflation.

These increases are due to come into effect from April 2019, subject to parliamentary approval. The Government intend to lay implementing regulations before Parliament in due course.

A copy of the response will be available from the BEIS website at: www.beis.gov.uk.

[HCWS1047]
Written Statements

Tuesday 30 October 2018

TREASURY

Banking Act 2009 Reporting

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Treasury has laid before the House of Commons a report required under section 231 of the Banking Act 2009 covering the period from 1 October 2017 to 31 March 2018. Copies of the document are available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

[HCWS1049]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Istanbul Convention Ratification: 2018 Report on Progress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):

I have today laid before Parliament and published the second annual report on progress toward ratification of the Council of Europe convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul convention). The UK signed the Istanbul convention in 2012 to reaffirm the UK’s strong commitment to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) and this Government remain fully committed to ratifying the convention.

The report is structured in line with the Istanbul convention’s key objectives and sets out the steps taken by the Government and the devolved Administrations toward ratification of convention, and measures taken forward since the 2017 report on progress.

We are continuing to step up our efforts to combat VAWG. We will refresh the cross-Government VAWG strategy later this Session to ensure that we are doing all that we can to tackle those crimes that disproportionately affect women. The refresh will reaffirm the Government’s commitment to addressing VAWG in all its forms, capture new programmes of work, including the forthcoming draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and provide an update on the delivery of existing actions.

In most respects the UK already complies with or goes further than the convention requires. As the 2017 report on progress set out, since signing the convention in 2012 we have strengthened the law, introduced new protective tools, and issued a range of guidance and support for frontline professionals. But we know there is more to do. That is why in March this year, we launched our “transforming the response to domestic abuse” consultation on what more we can do to protect and support victims, recognise the lifelong impact domestic abuse can have on children and make sure agencies effectively respond to domestic abuse. As part of this, we have consulted widely with partners on the legislative and non-legislative steps we can take to ensure victims are afforded the greatest possible protection.

We will be publishing a Government response and the landmark draft Domestic Abuse Bill in due course. The draft Bill will include the provisions on extraterritorial jurisdiction over the specific offences necessarily for compliance with the convention in England and Wales.

The publication of this report fulfils the requirement of section 2 of the Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Act 2017. I will be updating Parliament on progress in due course.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and it will be published on the Government’s website at gov.uk.

[HCWS1048]
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of his TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 August 2018) 6
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 August 2018) 6
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period) 0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period) 1
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period) 0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period) 3
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period) 2
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 August 2018) 4

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The second quarter TRG meetings took place on 6, 7, 11, 22 and 25 June 2018 and 3 and 5 July 2018. The most recent TRG meetings took place on 12, 14, 18, 25 and 27 September 2018. The next round of TRGs will take place during December 2018.

Three individuals have been charged with breach of a TPIM notice. Their criminal trials have yet to be heard.

[HCWS1050]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government remain fully committed to making planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new development, and to ensure that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them.

Today I have published a consultation on whether applicants should be required to conduct pre-application consultation with the local community prior to submitting a planning application for shale gas development. The consultation will also seek views on the process of community consultation that should be required, and what stages of shale gas development should be covered by the consultation.

The Government recognise that early engagement with local authorities on shale gas applications, including capitalising on formal pre-application discussions, is critical in building confidence in decision making, securing support for development proposals, and setting realistic timeframes for decisions. Requiring applicants to conduct community pre-application consultation prior to undertaking shale gas development could further strengthen the role local people play in the planning process.

This consultation is open for 10 weeks until 7 January 2019. I will inform the House of the outcome of the consultation as appropriate.

[HCWS1051]

JUSTICE

Secure Schools

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Today, I am publishing guidance on “How to Apply to Run a Secure School” launching the provider selection process for the first school. This follows our acceptance of, and commitment to delivering Charlie Taylor’s secure schools proposal in December 2016 and the Secretary of State’s announcement on 2 October 2018 of the site for the first secure school.

In the Government response to Charlie Taylor’s review, we committed to tackling violence and improve outcomes for children in custody. By creating the first secure school, we are taking a major step towards delivering a truly reformed youth custodial estate that is fit for purpose, characterised by the principles set out in the Taylor review. That is:

- child-focused providers
- strong leaders with freedom and autonomy
- a specialised workforce offering bespoke provision for individual children that has education, health, care and physical activity at its heart.

Secure schools will be run by academy trusts, not-for-profit organisations that are limited by guarantee. With secure schools, we want to place education and health at the heart of youth custody and create a therapeutic environment for the children in our care. It is imperative that the successful provider is driven to work with children in crisis.

We have worked in partnership with the Departments for Education and Health and Social Care, as well as NHS England, to achieve a truly cross-governmental commitment and approach to reforming youth justice. We have also engaged wholeheartedly with a wide range of stakeholders, and this has enabled us to benefit from insightful feedback from experts across the youth justice and education sectors. This means we can confidently say that the secure schools model is shaped by best practice and what we know really works.

We know that children in custody display a wide range of complex needs, so it is crucial that we provide the right type of education, support and care to address those needs. By empowering secure school providers to make key decisions, like being able to set and adapt the curriculum and timetable to provide meaningful activities, we can offer a bespoke service that best meets each child’s individual needs.

Giving providers the autonomy necessary to deliver services in an innovative way is a key part of the secure schools vision, but they will also be subject to a high
level of accountability to ensure appropriate safeguards are in place. We are working closely with Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission to establish the inspection regime for secure schools, and this will be supplemented by monthly independent visitor reviews and independent oversight from organisations such as the local safeguarding children’s board.

We agree with the importance that David Lammy’s review on the treatment of, and outcomes for, black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system places on addressing disproportionality in the youth justice system. With Charlie Taylor’s vision of seeing the child first and the offender second, we want secure schools to enable all students, including those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, to have trust in the system and be able to access the meaningful support they need to make sure their offending does not continue into adulthood.

The decision has been taken to close Medway and reopen it as a secure school. Delivering the first secure school at this site will provide a fresh start for youth custodial provision in the south-east and ensure that provision remains in place in this crucial area of demand.

The closure will enable us to set up the first school as quickly and cost-effectively as possibly, and it is a first step towards our future vision for youth custody. I would like to pay tribute to the hard work of staff whose work over the last two years has resulted in improvements for people living and working at Medway. These were recognised in a recent Ofsted report, which praised the care and consideration given by staff to improving Medway.

Secure school academy trusts will be funded in line with the terms set out in a funding agreement. They must adhere to this agreement and to the academies financial handbook. Academies are also subject to company law which requires that they have clear published frameworks for accountability. They are also subject to a system of independent audit of their accounts however secure schools will be subject to greater financial oversight.

The how to apply guidance is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/secure-schools-how-to-apply.

[HCWS1052]
Written Statements

Thursday 1 November 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Environment Council

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I attended the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on 9 October. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and Roseanna Cunningham, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, also attended.

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed.

Regulation on CO₂ standards for cars and vans

The main outcome of Council was reaching an agreed position ("general approach") on the regulation on emissions standards for new cars and vans, as part of which the European Commission had proposed a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030. Council began with a full roundtable where Ministers set out their respective positions. The UK intervened calling for greater ambition in 2030 and stressing the importance of getting the package right as a whole. Following debate the presidency presented a revised proposal and called for an informal vote for agreement. Agreement was not reached in that round so a further presidency proposal was presented: the key elements included a higher level of ambition of a 35% reduction by 2030, strengthened incentives for zero and low-emission vehicles, a strengthened review clause and a continuation of the niche derogation for smaller car manufacturers to 2030. This was sufficient for Council to achieve a general approach although a number of member states could not support the text or abstained. Trilogue discussions have already commenced.

Adoption of conclusions on the preparations for the United Nations framework convention on climate change (Katowice, Poland, 2-14 December 2018)

The Council adopted conclusions on the EU’s priorities and approach for the negotiations at the 24th session of the conference of the parties (COP24) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC).

The conclusions focus on: the urgency of climate action, especially in the light of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC’s) special report, “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, published on 8 October 2018; completion of the COP21 Paris agreement work programme (PAWP), which constitutes the implementing rules underpinning the agreement; and the Talanoa dialogue, the facilitative process culminating at COP24 for taking stock of collective progress towards the long-term goals of the Paris agreement.

The UK intervened to underline the stark and sobering messages of the IPCC report, that current global efforts are insufficient, and that COP24 is crucial to making the Paris agreement a reality. The UK highlighted the action the UK is taking to address climate change, including hosting Green Great Britain Week, promoted greater climate ambition and the EU updating its nationally determined contribution (NDC) by 2020, and signalled the importance of continued collaboration on climate change. The UK also supported the inclusion of at least one net zero 2050 scenario in the EU’s long-term strategy on emissions reductions and the need for common time frames for submission of NDCs to the UNFCCC.

The conclusions highlighted the EU’s ambitious climate and energy policy framework to 2030 and acknowledged that recent increases to the EU’s 2030 renewable and energy efficiency targets will have an impact on the EU’s level of achievement. Ministers expressed that they looked forward to the European Commission’s proposal for a strategy for long-term EU greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the objectives and long-term goals of the Paris agreement, underlining that the strategy should include a 1.5°C scenario and at least one pathway towards net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the EU by 2050. The conclusions stressed that the EU is ready to communicate or update its NDC by 2020 and recalled the importance of striving towards common time frames for all UNFCCC parties’ NDCs.

Conclusions on the convention on biological diversity (Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, 17-29 November 2018)

Council adopted conclusions on the convention on biological diversity ahead of the 14th session of the conference of the parties in November. Member states stressed the need to prioritise action on biodiversity as well as climate. Minister Coffey called for 30% of the world’s oceans to be protected by 2030, highlighted the UK’s illegal wildlife trade conference, and stressed the importance of taking action on mangroves. Minister Coffey also argued that a holistic approach was required in order to overcome climate change and other environmental challenges going forward, including biodiversity.

Regulation on CO₂ standards for heavy-duty vehicles

The Council held a policy debate on CO₂ emissions from heavy duty vehicles, with the presidency seeking views on the level of ambition and incentives for low and zero-emission vehicles. Council was broadly supportive of the proposals, with some pushing for more ambition and others indicating they thought the Commission’s proposal struck the right balance. The UK indicated its support for high ambition to help meet our clean growth and climate change ambitions.

AOB Items

Directive on single-use plastics

All Member states, including the UK, strongly welcomed the thrust of the proposal, but views were mixed on scope and targets. The UK, alongside other member states, stressed the need for extended producer responsibility requirements to be sufficiently flexible. Minister Coffey also highlighted the importance of taking into account the context in which products were used, for example in a medical setting, and emphasised that any fishing gear regulations needed to be implementable.

Reports on main recent international meetings

The presidency and Commission updated Council on two recent international meetings:

- 67th meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC 67) (Florianopolis, Brazil, 10-14 September 2018)
- United Nations high-level political forum on sustainable development (New York, 9-18 July 2018)
**Berlin declaration on nanomaterials**

Minister Coffey welcomed the information from the German delegation, and noted that the UK is fully engaged, and working with the Malta initiative, the working party for manufactured goods at the OECD, and with other member states to develop test guidelines for nanomaterials, through research and expert input. Minister Coffey also stated that the UK is leading a series of Horizon 2020 projects which are positively inputting into the Malti initiative, with other member states.

**Earth innovation forum conference and the second joint preparatory retreat of the bureaux of the UN environment assembly and of the committee of permanent representatives**

Estonia updated the Council on its preparations for the UN environment assembly 4 (UNEA-4), which will take place in Nairobi next year. These preparations included holding a high-level “Earth innovation forum” in Tallinn on 5 September.

**EU measures to tackle air pollution related to the import of used cars**

The Council noted the Bulgarian, Polish and Slovakian proposal to restrict member states from exporting highly polluting second hand cars to other member states. Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Cyprus and Romania supported this proposal.

The clean air programme—to protect health, climate and environment—for co-financing of new heat sources and thermal modernisation of single-family buildings in Poland

Poland updated the Council on its clean air programme.

**TREASURY**

**Capital Payment to an International Financial Institution: Contingent Liability**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that HM Treasury intends—subject to the standard procedure for notification to Parliament of the assumption of contingent liabilities as described below—to make the Government’s fourth and fifth annual capital contributions of $122,180,000 (approx. £95.3 million) to a cumulative total contingent liability of $1,955,040,000.

The payment of the fourth and fifth instalments of the capital contribution will therefore incur additional contingent liabilities in line with the amount of callable capital paid. As such, the UK will increase its current contingent liability by $488,760,000 (approx. £381 million) to a cumulative total contingent liability of $1,955,040,000 (approx. £1.5 billion) after the fourth payment, and by a final $488,760,000 to reach the total of $2,443,800,000. This will complete the UK’s purchase of AIIB shares.

Although the AIIB has the right to call for payment of this callable capital incurred when the initial capital instalment was paid, no such instance has occurred in any multilateral development bank in the past. If the liability were to be called, provision for any payment would be sought through the normal supply procedure.

As is usual, a departmental minute has been laid before Parliament to give at least 14 sitting days’ notice of the intent to incur a contingent liability.

1 Exchange rate as of 29 October 2018

**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Agriculture and Fisheries Council**

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Agriculture and Fisheries Council took place in Luxembourg on 15 October. The UK was represented by Katrina Williams, deputy permanent representative to the EU, and Rory O’Donnell, agriculture counsellor.

The main focus of the Council for fisheries was a regulation on fixing the fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea for 2019, for which a political agreement was sought. Additional scientific advice for 2019 was presented and the deal received unanimous support from member states.

There was also an exchange of views on the EU-Norway annual consultation for 2019. The Commission highlighted the 2019 deadline for full implementation of the EU landing obligations and the 2020 deadline for all EU stocks to be fished at maximum sustainable yield. The UK mentioned the importance of maximising inward trades of fish species to help mitigate potential “choke” problems in the North Sea in 2019.

During an exchange of views on the annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), some member states supported a move within ICCAT to progress the bluefin tuna recovery plan into a management plan. Commissioner Vella agreed with greater participation of small scale fishers but made it clear that the existing controls should remain in place.

For agriculture, the main item that was discussed was the progress report on the regulation on CAP strategic plans. Member states supported the new delivery model in principle but discussed making some of the requirements optional. In response, the Commission pointed out the importance of ensuring a level playing field.

The Commission debriefed Council on the G20 agricultural ministerial meeting that took place in July, highlighting that the conclusions reflected the EU’s position.

The presidency updated Council on the outcome of the informal process to identify a single EU candidate for the next Director General of the food and agriculture organisation of the United Nations (FAO).
A number of items were discussed under “any other business”:

The Italian delegation raised an item about the state of the European sugar market.

The Spanish delegation informed Council of the upcoming electoral round for the Director General of the international organisation of vine and wine (OIV).

The Commission gave an update on the state of play with African swine fever (ASF). An informal ministerial meeting on ASF will be held in the margins of the AgriFish Council on 19 December.

**International Whaling Commission**

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I was unable to attend this year’s meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC67) on 10-14 September 2018 in Brazil due to pressing commitments in relation to the UK’s exit from the EU. However, a strong UK delegation was present.

This meeting was particularly challenging, with a number of complex and controversial proposals tabled. These included a significant challenge to the long-standing moratorium on commercial whaling. However, I am happy to report that all UK objectives for this meeting were achieved and the strong global protection in place for cetaceans was maintained.

As always, the UK delegation worked tirelessly behind the scenes, supporting the EU presidency, analysing proposals, brokering compromises, and influencing crucial decisions, all with the aim of securing improvements to the conservation and welfare of cetaceans.

The UK also ensured its long-standing opposition to commercial whaling and whaling under special permit (scientific whaling) was made clear at every appropriate opportunity. As always, there was the need for careful diplomacy, with the UK working hard to ensure dialogue remained constructive and respectful despite the fundamental differences in views.

Of particular importance at this meeting was resisting the proposal by Japan to restructure the organisation to commercial whaling. This complex proposal sought to create a new whaling committee within the IWC to oversee a return to commercial whaling on abundant whale populations and relax the voting rules for amending the convention’s schedule (which contains the provision establishing the moratorium) from a three-quarter to a simple majority. The UK worked extremely hard on defending against this proposal, leading the co-ordination with like-minded countries to ensure a coherent and well aligned strategy. I was therefore extremely relieved to see that the proposal failed to secure sufficient support and that the critical commercial whaling moratorium remains in place. The UK will now use the intersessional period to reach out to countries on both sides of the debate to ensure that constructive engagement within the IWC is maintained.

I am pleased to also report that a number of other important agreements were reached, in particular with regards aboriginal subsistence whaling (ASW) which was a challenging but important proposal and one that the UK had been engaging closely on for several months prior to the meeting. The proposal sought to renew, and in some cases increase, quotas for indigenous communities reliant on whales for subsistence purposes. In addition, it also introduced expanded carryover provisions to allow greater flexibility for hunters and a mechanism to automatically renew quotas without the need for the IWC to discuss and agree providing the scientific advice was favourable and there were no substantive changes to the hunt or subsistence need. After a series of complex negotiations within which the UK was centrally placed, an eventual compromise was reached, a compromise that protects indigenous communities’ access to food, reducing the stress and uncertainty associated with returning to the IWC every six years to request food for their families, but crucially balancing this by ensuring the IWC maintains its important oversight role and protecting its decision-making power in the event that the status quo situation of the hunts changes. I am extremely pleased by this landmark decision for the IWC which clearly demonstrates the maturity and functioning nature of the organisation.

I was also encouraged to see a number of important decisions taken on tackling important threats to cetaceans, in particular the passing by consensus of resolutions on underwater noise and ghost gear. The Florianopolis declaration also passed following a vote, delivering a clear statement from anti-whaling nations on their vision for the future of the IWC; one that is rooted in conservation without the need for commercial or scientific whaling.

Important progress was also made on further modernisation of the organisation through institutional and governance improvements. An intersessional process was established to bring forward recommendations and develop a programme of work in time for the next biennial meeting in 2020. The working group tasked with delivering this will be chaired by the USA, with the UK taking on an important role as Vice Chair.

I was pleased to see how the discussions on special permits progressed following the report of the intersessional working group established by resolution at the previous biennial meeting. The UK participated in this group, expertly chaired by Australia, which delivered for the first time a clear and concise summary of the advice of the scientific committee and proposed conclusions for the IWC to adopt. Despite disagreements from pro-whaling nations, the IWC meeting report will reflect these conclusions as representing the view of the commission, with a statement opposing from those that disagreed. This represents a good outcome and for the first time provides significant clarity of position for the IWC on this matter.

Once again I am pleased to report that the UK, in line with the agreed position of EU member states, voted in favour of establishing a South Atlantic whale sanctuary. Unfortunately the proposal failed to gain the three-quarters majority required for adoption. I expect this proposal to be re-tabled at the next meeting in 2020, which, in the absence of any other offer, will be hosted by Slovenia.

Finally, I was pleased that the UK led work to develop a tool to assess the welfare implications of non-hunting threats to cetacean welfare and efforts to further strengthen the conservation work of the IWC received endorsement. We will continue working closely with NGOs and academia to maintain momentum and continue to deliver improved conservation and welfare outcomes for cetaceans.
In conclusion, despite the significant challenges faced at this meeting, this can be viewed as a success. We now turn our attention to the intersessional period and, following our successful nomination to the IWC bureau, begin building for the 2020 meeting. Integral to this will be our continued close working with civil society in delivering our shared goal of improving the conservation and welfare of cetaceans globally.

[HCWS1055]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Serious and Organised Crime

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): My first priority as Home Secretary is to keep the public safe. Today I have published a new, revised and updated, “Serious and Organised Crime Strategy”. The strategy has been laid before Parliament as Command Paper (Cm 9718), and copies are available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

Serious and organised crime affects more UK citizens, more often, than any other national security threat. Its perpetrators ruthlessly target the most vulnerable, ruining lives and blighting communities. Their activities cost us at least £37 billion each year and have a corrosive impact on our public services, communities, reputation and way of life.

Since the previous strategy was published in 2013, we have made significant progress in creating the powers, partnerships and law enforcement structures we need to respond to the threat. The law enforcement community, and the National Crime Agency in particular, has an impressive and sustained track record of pursuing serious and organised criminals and bringing them to justice. But the threat we face has grown increasingly complex over the past five years. Criminals and networks are quick to exploit the rate of technological change and globalisation, whether it is grooming children online, using malware to steal personal data or moving illegal goods, people and money across borders. They have learnt to become more adaptable and resilient. Our response must continue to adapt to new challenges.

The revised strategy follows a comprehensive cross-Government review, led by the Home Office. It sets out the Government’s new approach to prevent serious and organised crime, build our defences against it, track down the perpetrators, from child sex offenders to corrupt elites, and bring them to justice. We will allow no safe space for these people, their networks or their illicit money in our society.

Our new approach will be to target the highest harm networks and the most dangerous and determined criminals exploiting vulnerable people, using all the powers and levers available to the state to deny them access to money, assets and infrastructure. But we will not achieve our aim through disruption alone. We will also work with the public, businesses and communities to help stop them from being targeted by criminals and support those who are; and we will intervene early with those at risk of being drawn into criminality.

We will invest at least £48 million in 2019-20 in law enforcement capabilities to strengthen efforts to tackle illicit finance, which will enhance our overall response to serious and organised crime, including additional investment in the multi-agency National Economic Crime Centre. We will pilot new approaches to preventing people from engaging in serious and organised crime and build community resilience against it. We will establish a new national tasking framework for law enforcement. We will improve engagement with the private sector, particularly the information and communications technology industry. We will also expand our overseas capabilities, including establishing a new network of overseas policy specialists.

The new strategy will align our efforts to tackle serious and organised crime as one cohesive system. We will equip the whole of Government, the private sector, communities and individual citizens to play their part in a single collective endeavour.

[HCWS1053]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In the written statement of 12 March 2018, (HCWS535), the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), told the House that there was consensus amongst the five Buckinghamshire councils that local government across the county should be reorganised, and that two alternative approaches for doing this were being proposed. He announced that he was minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal for replacing the current structures with a single new unitary council, and that he was not minded to implement the locally-led proposal for two new unitary councils for the same area. There followed a period for representations.

Since then I have received over 3,000 representations, which I have carefully considered along with all other relevant information available to me. I am clear that there is broad consent for change in Buckinghamshire. A survey, conducted by Opinion Research Services of a representative sample of residents, found that 75% agreed with the principle of reorganisation in Buckinghamshire, and overall 87% of the representations made to me supported change. Both proposals made it clear that retaining the status quo is not an option.

Having assessed both proposals against the criteria that we announced to the House on 28 February 2017 (PQ 65271), I have concluded that whilst both proposals meet the criterion for a “good deal of local support”, only the proposal for a single unitary council satisfies the criteria for “improving local government” and for “being a credible geography” and that in any event the proposal for a single unitary council is better able to meet the criteria overall.

The Government’s policy—as explained to the House by Ministers on 22 May 2018, Official Report, column 336WH, is that we will not seek to impose top-down solutions on local government; where there is a desire and a thrust for more change and innovation we will look to support those involved, according to the criteria we have laid out. Given the desire and thrust for change and innovation in Buckinghamshire, that the five councils agree that the current structures are not sustainable,
and that the locally-led proposal for a single unitary is
the only proposal that meets the three criteria, I am
persuaded that the right course of action is to establish
a new single unitary district council for Buckinghamshire.

Accordingly, I am today announcing that I have
decided to implement, subject to parliamentary approval,
the locally-led proposal to replace the existing five
councils across Buckinghamshire—the two tier structure
of Buckinghamshire County Council and the district
councils of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and
Wycombe—by one new single unitary district council,
and that I have decided not to implement the proposal
for two new unitary councils.

Whilst I am clear that the single unitary proposal
fully meets the three criteria, I recognise that some have
questioned whether such a structure might weaken local
democratic engagement at the most local level. To help
reassure any who might be concerned on this, I intend
to speak with the five councils to determine whether I
should modify the proposal before implementing it, in
relation to councillor numbers, perhaps providing for
three-member electoral wards. I will also expect the new
unitary council, and in the meantime the existing councils,
to engage with their local communities about the
appropriate arrangements for civic representation for
towns and parishes. I similarly expect the councils to
promote and help support the development of
neighbourhood plans, as I consider these can be key
building blocks for the successful implementation of
change in Buckinghamshire that residents deserve.

In March, the then Secretary of State was clear that,
in relation to establishing a single council, further steps
were needed to secure local consent amongst the local
partners. Further steps have been taken, with Ministers
having meetings with council leaders. The great majority
of local partners do support the proposal for a single
unitary council including the police, the ambulance
service, CCG, NHS trust, independent chair of the
Adult Safeguarding Board, Thames Valley local enterprise
partnership, and Bucks Business First. In addition to
enjoying a good deal of local support, I am satisfied
that the proposal meets the requirement for local consent
set out in the Cities and Local Government Devolution
Act 2016.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament
drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give
effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament
approves this legislation the new council will be established
on 1 April 2020 with the first elections to the council
held on 7 May 2020. I intend to explore with the district
councils whether they would like me to make and lay
before Parliament an order to delay for one year the
May 2019 local elections in Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern,
South Bucks and Wycombe, so as to avoid councillors
being elected for only one year if Parliament approves
the legislation establishing the new council.

From March 2019, the sunset clause means that the
consent provisions in the process we are currently using
for reorganisations fall away. In future, any proposal
considered under the Cities and Local Government
Devolution Act process will require unanimous consent
from all councils. Alternatively, I may issue a formal
invitation for proposals, and the specific circumstances
in which I would do so will be set out in due course.
Written Statements

Monday 5 November 2018

DEFENCE

Armed Forces: Commonwealth Recruitment

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Citizens from the Commonwealth have a long tradition of serving with distinction in the Armed Forces. In the light of changes to the size of our armed forces a five-year UK residency criterion for Commonwealth citizens wishing to join the armed forces was re-imposed in 2013. A limited waiver to this requirement was introduced in May 2016 to recruit up to 200 Commonwealth personnel per annum to fill skill shortages. We now intend to remove the five-year UK residency criterion for Commonwealth citizens and increase recruitment to 1,350 across the Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force. Applications will be accepted from all Commonwealth countries, although in order to mitigate the risks associated with unaccompanied minors travelling to the UK without the guarantee of a job, we will not be accepting applications from those under 18. Applicants from Commonwealth countries will need to meet all necessary recruitment criteria for the service and role they wish to join. Security standards will be assessed on a case by case basis, and may differ from the current UK security requirements. In 2009 a 15% limit on foreign and Commonwealth nationals in a number of areas of the Army (the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC), the Royal Army Dental Corps (RADC) and the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC) was established as a necessary and proportionate requirement to sustain operational effectiveness. As we now intend to increase the numbers of Commonwealth citizens joining across the full spread of Army roles, we have concluded that it is appropriate to both limit the overall numbers recruited, and to replicate the 15% limit across all cap badges. The requirement for individuals to have Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or Indefinite Leave to Enter (ILE) to join the reserves has not been changed. This will not affect personnel from the Republic of Ireland, or those in the Brigade of Gurkhas. This policy will be kept under review.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House this year’s financial summary of the Defence Equipment Plan. This is the seventh consecutive annual publication of the equipment plan summary, and presents our plans to deliver the equipment needed by our armed forces to defend the country and keep our people safe. The Government are committed to meeting the NATO target to spend 2% of GDP on defence and at least 20% of that spending on equipment. This report sets out our plans to spend £186 billion on equipment in the 10 years from 2018-19.

We have substantially revised the content of this report to make it more transparent and accessible. For the first time, we have set out the strategic context for the equipment plan and presented in detail the Department’s assessment of the affordability of the plan. The NAO has assessed our plans and we are grateful to it for its report which is also published today.

In 2017-18 the Department achieved several notable milestones in procurement and support of equipment and successfully delivered the plan within budget. Looking ahead, there are significant financial pressures we must manage in the equipment plan. Our central estimate for the cost of the equipment plan at April 2018 exceeded the allocated budget by an average of 3.7% over the 10 years from 2018-19. The shortfall is greatest in the four years from 2018-19. This forecast will vary as risks and opportunities materialise and project plans mature or are changed through management action.

The Department secured £1 billion additional funding in the autumn Budget, which will help reduce the risk to affordability until 2020 and allow the Department to continue delivering existing plans for Joint Force 2025 and to modernise some key capability areas.

We are also taking steps to improve management of the plan and enable longer term affordability. The modernising defence programme was launched to further strengthen and modernise UK defence and the armed forces and put UK defence on to an enduringly affordable footing for the future. This work involves rigorously pursuing productivity and efficiency gains as well as prioritising capabilities to meet the changing threat environment. It will reshape the content of the equipment plan and improve the way in which it is managed. We will report on the implications for the equipment plan in subsequent financial summary reports.

HMS Victorious: Refuel

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): On 6 March 2014, the then Secretary of State for Defence announced the decision to refuel HMS Vanguard and, pending an assessment, to keep the option open to refuel for HMS Victorious in 2018. This was a prudent precaution following the discovery in 2012 of a microscopic breach in the cladding around one of the fuel cells in the prototype reactor plant at our shore test facility at Dounreay in Scotland. Having conducted an evidence-based assessment it has been determined that it is not necessary to refuel HMS Victorious.

The safety of the United Kingdom’s submarine force remains our highest priority. We continue to work closely with the independent regulators to ensure the safety of operations both alongside and at sea.

Our submarine-based deterrent has been safely operating for over 50 years and studies have demonstrated that no alternative system is as capable, resilient or cost effective as the current deterrent on continuous patrol.
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Great Britain China Centre: Tailored Review

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am announcing today the start of a tailored review of the Great Britain China Centre (GBCC). The GBCC is a non-departmental public body of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Its principal activity is to encourage mutual knowledge and understanding through the promotion of closer cultural, professional, economic, educational, legal, judicial and other contacts between Britain and China.

As a non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by the FCO, the GBCC is required to undergo a tailored review at least once in every Parliament. The principle aims of tailored reviews are to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, are well governed and are properly accountable for what they do.

The review will provide a robust scrutiny of and assurance on the continuing need for the GBCC—both its function and its form. If the review finds the GBCC should be retained in its current form and status, the review will then consider GBCC’s capacity for delivering on its core mandate more effectively and efficiently. It will also assess the control and governance arrangements that are in place to ensure that GBCC and the FCO are complying with recognised principles of good corporate governance.

The review will follow guidance published in 2016 by the Cabinet Office: “Tailored Reviews: guidance on reviews of public bodies”. The terms of reference for the review can be found at: www.gov.uk.

In conducting the tailored review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK and overseas, including staff, management and the board of the GBCC. These consultations will include participating and sponsor organisations of GBCC projects and events and partners from across UK Government, foreign Governments, academics and civil society.

Both Houses will be informed of the outcome of the review when it is completed and copies of the report of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1059]

Marshall Aid Commemorative Commission: Tailored Review

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am announcing today the start of a tailored review of the Marshall Aid Commemorative Commission (MACC). Established by an Act of Parliament in 1953, in commemoration of the assistance received by the United Kingdom from the United States under the Marshall Plan, the MACC administers the British Marshall scholarships.

As a non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the MACC is required to undergo a tailored review at least once in every Parliament. The principal aims of tailored reviews are to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, are well governed and properly accountable for what they do.

The review will provide a robust scrutiny of, and assurance on, the continuing need for the MACC—both its function and its form. It will then assess the governance and control arrangements in place to ensure they are compliant with the recognised principles of good corporate governance and delivering good value for money. The review will look both at the current performance of the MACC and at how it is able to respond and adapt to those factors which are most likely to affect its position as a prestigious scholarship provider and effective public diplomacy tool for the UK.

A challenge group, comprising senior FCO and Cabinet Office officials, will have regular oversight of the interim findings, to ensure the review is robust and rigorous.


In conducting this tailored review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders in the UK and US, including across UK Government, devolved Administrations, partner academic institutions, current scholars, alumni, the MACC’s volunteer commissioners and recruitment panels, and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, which provides administration for the programme.

I shall inform the House of the outcome of the review when it is completed and copies of the report of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The UK is committed to preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. We believe the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) remains the best way of achieving that goal. It is a critical agreement that makes the world a safer place. The United Kingdom, and our European partners, continue to work with the remaining parties to the deal to maintain it. We expect Iran to meet its nuclear commitments as set out in the agreement in full.

In May of this year, President Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States of America from the JCPOA. In consequence, today US sanctions on Iran will be re-imposed, including on Iran’s oil and gas exporting capability. We have been clear with the US Administration about our determination to preserve the JCPOA, and the fact that this is driven by our national security interests.

As a party to the JCPOA, we remain committed to ensuring that Iran receives the sanctions relief to which it is entitled. This includes taking steps to enable firms wishing to engage in legitimate trade with Iran to do so. We are working with our partners France and Germany, fellow parties to the JCPOA, to develop a special purpose vehicle (SPV) to enable continued sanctions relief to reach Iran, and allow for European exporters and importers to trade in compliance with EU and UN sanctions.
In parallel to our work with partners to maintain the JCPOA, we continue to take steps with our partners against the IRGC’s destabilising behaviour across the region and to hold Iran to account on human rights, including its treatment of British-Iranians detained in Iran.

[HCWS1061]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Government Vision on Prevention

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Today I am placing before the House the Government’s prevention vision, “Prevention is Better than Cure”.

This document sets out a cross-Government vision for stopping health problems from arising in the first place and, when they do, supporting people to manage them as effectively as possible. Our mission is to improve healthy life expectancy, so that, by 2035, we are enjoying at least five extra years of healthy, independent life, while closing the gap between the richest and poorest. When it comes to prevention, we all have a role to play: individuals, families, communities, employers, charities, the NHS, social care, and local and national Government. Only by working together can we make this vision a reality.

I am placing a copy of the prevention vision in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1063]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I have today laid before Parliament new legislation to implement a new, banded structure of fees for a grant of representation, commonly known as a grant of probate.

Fees are an essential element of funding an effective, modern courts and tribunals service, thereby ensuring and protecting access to justice. The Government are investing £1 billion to modernise and upgrade the courts system so that it works even better for everyone, including victims, witnesses, litigants, judges and legal professionals. This includes introducing changes to our probate service, which offers an important service to those who are bereaved. The reform of the service allows people to apply for a grant of probate online and to access assisted digital support for those who may not necessarily have the skills or access to engage digitally, and empowers individuals to make applications themselves instead of needing to instruct and pay for solicitors. This aims to reduce the burden on applicants, by providing a more efficient and simpler application process.

But such a courts system is simply not possible without proper funding. Since the previous Government set out their intentions to introduce a banded fee structure for grants of probate in February 2017, a number of concerns were raised. We have listened to these very carefully, and under today’s proposal we have revised fees so they will never be more than 0.5% of the value of the estate. Moreover, by raising the estate value threshold from £5,000 to £50,000, we will be lifting around 25,000 estates annually out of fees altogether. For those who do pay, around 80% of estates will pay £750 or less, and all income raised will be spent on running the courts and tribunal service.

It has long been the case that the users of our courts make a contribution to its costs, and we believe this remains both relevant and reasonable—minimising the burden on other taxpayers. Crucially, by asking those who use the courts to pay more, where they can afford to do so, we are able to fund areas where we charge no fees to vulnerable victims and users, including for example domestic violence and non-molestation orders, and for cases before the First-tier Tribunal concerning mental health.

This new banded fee model represents a fair and more progressive way to pay for probate services compared to the current flat fee and reflects our commitment to protecting access to justice by ensuring we have a properly funded and resourced courts system. We are also confident these fees will never be unaffordable. The cost of the fee is recoverable from the estate and executors have several options to fund it. Moreover, the Lord Chancellor retains a power to remit a fee if he considers there are exceptional circumstances.

We will also publish a guidance document before the statutory instrument comes into force, entitled “Guidance on Ways to Pay for Probate Fees”. This will benefit from external stakeholder input, and will help applicants to choose the option to pay which most suits their circumstances, providing reassurance at a difficult time.

[HCWS1066]
Written Statements

Tuesday 6 November 2018

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 6 November 2018. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director-General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue

EU Finance Ministers will be joined by representatives of the EFTA countries to exchange views on the opportunities and challenges of FinTech to the financial sector and economic growth.

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will briefly the Council on the outcomes of the 5 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. The Council will also exchange views on the annual report of the European Fiscal Board.

Digital services tax

The Council will exchange views regarding the state of play of the negotiations on the digital services tax directive.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Austrian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European Court of Auditors’ annual report

The president of the Court of Auditors will present the auditors' report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2017 financial year.

EU statistical package

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the autumn EU statistical package and to review progress achieved, providing guidance for further work in this area.

Conclusions on climate finance

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on climate finance as part of the annual process in the run up to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) conference of parties (COP) in Poland on 2 to 14 Dec.

Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings in Indonesia

The Austrian presidency and the Commission will present the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 11 and 12 October in Bali, Indonesia

[HCWS1074]

Double Taxation Convention: Austria

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
A double taxation convention with Austria was signed on 23 October 2018. The text of the convention is available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

Defence

Royal Navy Police Inspection

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to inform the House and that I am laying before the House today the second report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services (HMICFRS) inspection of the Royal Navy Police (RNP).

The Armed Forces Act 2011 places a duty on HMICFRS to inspect and report to the Ministry of Defence on the independence and effectiveness of investigations carried out by each service police force, and this is HMICFRS second statutory inspection report on the RNP.

I consider this report to be a very positive endorsement of the RNP providing assurance from an independent civilian authority that the RNP's police performance inspections (PPI) provide the assurance required that the activity of RNP units meet legal and professional standards. No recommendations were made and only four areas for improvement were identified. The Royal Navy accepts the report's findings and through the implementation of a revised PPI process, it is considered that all four areas of improvement have now been addressed.

[HCWS1072]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: November 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 12 November 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

Ministers will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework proposals with the presidency.

Preparation of the European Council on 13 and 14 December 2018

The Council will discuss the draft agenda for the December European Council.

European Semester 2019—road map

The Austrian presidency and the incoming Romanian presidency will present the timetable for the 2019 European semester, which will provide a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU.
Legislative programming—Commission’s work programme 2019

The Commission will set out the legislative and other initiatives that it intends to present to the Council and European Parliament during 2019.

Subsidiarity package

The Commission will present its subsidiarity package which was published on 23 October. In those areas which do not form part of the EU’s exclusive competence, the principle of subsidiarity means that action should only be taken at EU level when the desired objectives cannot be effectively achieved by action taken at national or regional level.

Annual rule of law dialogue

An annual rule of law dialogue has formed part of the GAC agenda since 2014. The presidency has invited Ministers to consider the topic of trust in public institutions for this year’s dialogue.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission will provide Ministers with an update on the rule of law in Poland.

Values of the Union—Hungary—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Ministers will discuss the article 7(1) procedure in relation to Hungary.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Social Care Provider Update

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Yesterday, in line with duties set out in the Care Act 2014 the Care Quality Commission notified 84 local authorities that they were issuing a stage 6 notification for the homecare provider, Allied Healthcare.

I would like to update the House on why the Care Quality Commission has taken this action now, and steps being taken to assure people with care and support needs being met by Allied Healthcare that they should not suffer a gap in their care service—even if their care is funded privately.

A stage 6 notification is intended to be an early warning to local authorities that CQC consider that the business failure of a provider in their area is likely and this could lead to services ceasing for people who receive care from that provider.

The Care Quality Commission has not taken this decision lightly. They have continued to monitor the financial sustainability of Allied Healthcare since it secured a company voluntary arrangement in May. It has been speaking with Allied Healthcare’s senior management team on a regular basis to seek assurances about the company’s performance and the sustainability of its future finances. The company has not been able to provide the necessary assurances beyond 30 November 2018 and the Care Quality Commission has taken this prudent action in order to give local authorities the time to prepare their contingency plans to ensure continuity of care, in the event that it is required.

Allied Healthcare can take action to reassure the Care Quality Commission of its financial position beyond 30 November 2018, in which case the Care Quality Commission would revise its position accordingly. The Care Quality Commission is clear that there is no current service disruption. Allied Healthcare remain responsible for these services and their staff.

The law was changed in 2014 giving the Care Quality Commission a new responsibility to monitor the financial sustainability of the largest and most difficult to replace care providers across the country. It means the CQC can notify local authorities of the likelihood of service disruption caused by service failure earlier so that they have more time to prepare their plans to protect individuals.

Local authorities have a statutory duty under their section 48(2) of the Care Act to meet the needs of individuals temporarily if their care provider is no longer able to carry on. Business failure is a normal part of a functioning market and local authorities have appropriate plans in place to minimise disruption of services. The Care Quality Commission has provided local authorities with time to begin their preparations. This will include working with Allied Healthcare to ensure the local authority is given an up to date list of all people the company is providing care for, whether this is state or privately funded. Local authorities will be reviewing contingency plans and speaking to other providers to ensure continuity of care.

The Care Quality Commission and my Department are closely monitoring the situation. They are also working closely with the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and NHS England to ensure that local authorities are supported in their contingency planning to ensure individuals’ care and support needs continue to be met.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Bellwin Scheme: Leicester

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): On 25 February 2018, there was a major explosion and fire in Hinckley Road, Leicester which resulted in the tragic loss of five lives. I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified to cover eligible costs incurred by Leicestershire fire and rescue authority in dealing with this emergency.

A scheme will therefore be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to the Leicestershire fire and rescue authority to cover 100% of their eligible costs incurred above a threshold.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Pre-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The EU Trade Foreign Affairs Council will take place in Brussels on 9 November 2018. I will represent the UK.

The substantive items on 9 November will be:

Legislative items: information from the presidency about the regulation on foreign direct investment screening; information from the presidency about the regulation on implementing horizontal bilateral safeguards in certain agreements.

Non-legislative items: the state of play of World Trade Organisation modernisation, and an update on the state of play of the ongoing EU trade negotiations. The Commission will also present a report on the implementation of free trade agreements.
TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I attended the informal meeting of members of the Transport and Environment Councils in Graz, Austria on 29 and 30 October.

The programme for the informal meetings included separate sessions for transport and environment Ministers and a joint session for both Ministers entitled “Starting a new Era: clean, safe and affordable mobility for Europe”.

On 29 October, Transport Ministers were invited to discuss the Commission’s proposal on “Discontinuing seasonal changes of time (summer time)”. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Henley, represented the UK at this session and explained that the UK Government do not support the proposed directive. He also noted the Commission had fallen short on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality as has been highlighted by the decision of the House of Lords to issue a reasoned opinion. (The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee has subsequently recommended that the House of Commons also issue a reasoned opinion on this matter.)

There was broad consensus in Council that the timetable proposed by the Commission was too short and thus there was widespread support for the presidency’s intention to provide for an extension. A small minority of member states were notably critical of the proposal while the majority welcomed the initiative, albeit noting its deficiencies. Several member states advocated the need to co-ordinate across borders in order to know the final time zone arrangements before taking the decision to abolish daylight saving.

Environment Ministers were then invited to discuss “The future of European environmental policy”. The Secretary of State for the Environment was represented by officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Ministers broadly agreed on the need for an eighth environment action programme (EAP) with a consensus that it should take full account of climate change given the report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on global warming of 1.5 °C published last month.

At the joint session for Transport and Environment Ministers on 30 October, interventions were wide-ranging with common themes being the need to move towards zero emissions vehicles and enabling people to choose sustainable ways to travel. These themes were reflected in the presidency’s “Graz declaration” published after the meeting. For the UK, I stressed the importance of ambition to accelerate the development and introduction of zero emission vehicles, recalling that the Prime Minister had hosted the world’s first zero emission vehicle summit in Birmingham recently.

The subject for the afternoon session was road safety. Transport Ministers shared experiences with progress to date in reducing casualties and their perception of the challenges in making more progress. In my intervention I noted that human error was a factor in over 85% of road accidents, and that connected and automated vehicles offered opportunities to make our roads safer.

In the margins I met with a number of EU Transport Ministers to discuss current EU transport business and how relationships will evolve as the UK leaves the EU.

[HCWS1069]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Today the Government are publishing the consultation paper on collective defined contribution schemes. This sets out our vision for this new form of occupational pension scheme. We will be seeking stakeholder views on how we can best implement such schemes. CDC schemes will offer a new option for employers looking to help their employees save for retirement. A copy of this document will be placed in the Library of the House.

The UK has a world-class occupational pension system—but there are always opportunities for further innovation where this can benefit savers and businesses alike. The Work and Pensions Select Committee recently published a report calling for the adoption of CDC schemes in the UK: the Government welcomed this report and are grateful to the Committee for its support and advice. It is important to be clear that CDC schemes are not a panacea, and that members could see their pension incomes fluctuate. However, as the Work and Pensions Select Committee so clearly recognised, a robustly designed and appropriately regulated CDC regime can offer positive outcomes for both employers and pension savers. The Royal Mail and the Communication Workers’ Union are already working closely together to establish a CDC scheme, which the Government see as an encouraging sign of the consensus in this area.

Saving for retirement is an extremely important part of people’s financial planning, representing their hopes for the future. Throughout the last decade, the Government have therefore worked closely with the pensions, financial services and consumer community to strengthen the UK’s pension savings culture. Together we have transformed the pensions landscape, delivering social change on an unprecedented scale. The establishment of CDC pension schemes is a key strand of this work.

[HCWS1075]
Petition

Thursday 25 October 2018

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation
The petition of residents of the Cotswolds,

Declare that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated: further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.]

[P002278]
Petition

Wednesday 31 October 2018

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The royal wedding and public money

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that taxpayers should provide no funding for a private wedding, no matter who is getting married; further that the exact details of royal wedding funding are shrouded in secrecy; further that we do know that expensive road closures and policing will be required and further that we know local councils and the taxpayer ends up footing the bill.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the highest standards of openness and transparency relating to the funding of Princess Eugenie and Jack Brooksbank wedding; further to tell the Government to commit no public funds to the wedding and to publish a report of all costs to taxpayers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Dent Coad.]
Petition

Monday 5 November 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT
Medical cannabis oil

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that it is an injustice that sufferers of long term and terminal illness in the United Kingdom are currently unable to legally access Cannabis Oil for medical use which may in many cases be their only relief from pain or suffering; further that an online petition by Wansbeck Constituent, Paul Keeney, which has gathered the support of over 280,000 signatories in its calls for the Government to legalise Cannabis Oil for medical use; further the Government should listen to these calls and immediately act on reforming legislation which currently prevents cannabis oil being used in medical treatment in the United Kingdom; and further that in support of that petition and the work of Paul Keeney, this petition seeks to bring the attention of the Government to this important issue and further call for immediate action to be taken to legalise Cannabis Oil for Medical Use.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to legalise Cannabis Oil for medical use in the United Kingdom.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ian Lavery, Official Report, 26 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 862.]

[P002161]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):
Recent high profile cases have shown the need to look more closely at the use of cannabis-based products for medicinal use in the UK. That is why the Government committed to making these products available for specialist doctors on the GMC Specialist register to prescribe legally by the autumn.

This followed a two-part review in which the Government approach was guided by expert medical and scientific advice, such as the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and the UK’s Chief Medical Advisor, that there are potential medicinal benefits from these products.

While the Government have acted to ensure that patients are able to access the most appropriate forms of healthcare, the Government also recognise the particular challenges surrounding cannabis and, as such, we are taking a cautious approach to provide the necessary protections and safeguards both the Government and ACMD feel are essential.

The Government have now set out how cannabis-based products for medicinal use will be defined in order to make it lawful for them to be prescribed when specialist doctors believe this is appropriate. There are three broad requirements for products before they can be prescribed:
- the product is or contains cannabis, cannabis resin, cannabino or cannabinol derivatives;
- the product must be produced for medicinal use in humans;
- it must be a product that is regulated as a medicinal product or an ingredient of a medicinal product.

Additionally, due to the known harms of smoking and the potential operational impact on misuse and diversion, smoking will remain prohibited.

Regulations have now been laid in Parliament to give effect to these measures and the rescheduling of cannabis-based products for medicinal use came into force on 1 November. It is the intention of Northern Ireland to mirror these regulations.

As the Government have been clear throughout, this is by no means the first step in the legalisation of cannabis for recreational purposes. Cannabis is controlled under Class B of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 as there is clear scientific and medical evidence that cannabis is a harmful drug which can damage people’s mental and physical health, and harms individuals and communities.
Let us be really clear about what happened. The advice that the Department got was that section 27 of the Social Security Act 1998 applied. That was why we felt we had to make the decision to back-pay to 2014. When additional information came forward from the National Audit Office and the Child Poverty Action Group about official error, the Secretary of State took the decision that, of course, we must do what the law says and go right back to the point of conversion. It was not in any way that the Government were trying not to do the right thing. We have proactively been utterly transparent and open with the House about this error, and we want to fix it as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about the two phases. The first group of people that we are looking at date back to pre-2014 and the second group are from 2014. We have started to make payments to both groups of people, and so far we have paid out £420 million to the pre-2014 group. "[Official Report, 18 October 2018, Vol. 647, c.793."]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George).

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady asked about the two phases. The first group of people that we are looking at date back to pre-2014 and the second group are from 2014. We have started to make payments to both groups of people, and we will pay out £420 million to the pre-2014 group.

JUSTICE

Sport and Recidivism

The following is an extract from oral questions to the Secretary of State for Justice on 9 October 2018.

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

Edward Argar: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight again the importance of sport. The report published by Professor Meek in the summer, of which we have accepted 53 of the 54 recommendations, sets out a clear direction of travel—that is, alongside education and developing skills, and provisions for mental and physical health, sport plays a key role for prisoners in the rehabilitative process. "[Official Report, 9 October 2018, Vol. 647, c.11-12.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar):

An error has been identified in the response that I gave to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey).
Edward Argar: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight again the importance of sport. The report published by Professor Meek in the summer, of which we have accepted 11 of the 12 recommendations, sets out a clear direction of travel—that is, alongside education and developing skills, and provisions for mental and physical health, sport plays a key role for prisoners in the rehabilitative process.

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Justice on 9 October 2018.

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

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


Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart):

An error has been identified in the response that I gave to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith).

The correct response should have been:

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


T5. [907014] Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Given the criticisms contained in the report produced recently by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation, what assurances can the Minister give that all community rehabilitation companies’ contracts will stipulate that the probation officer qualification is absolutely necessary for the safe supervision of cases in which domestic violence is a factor?

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


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The correct response should have been: